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成田良悟

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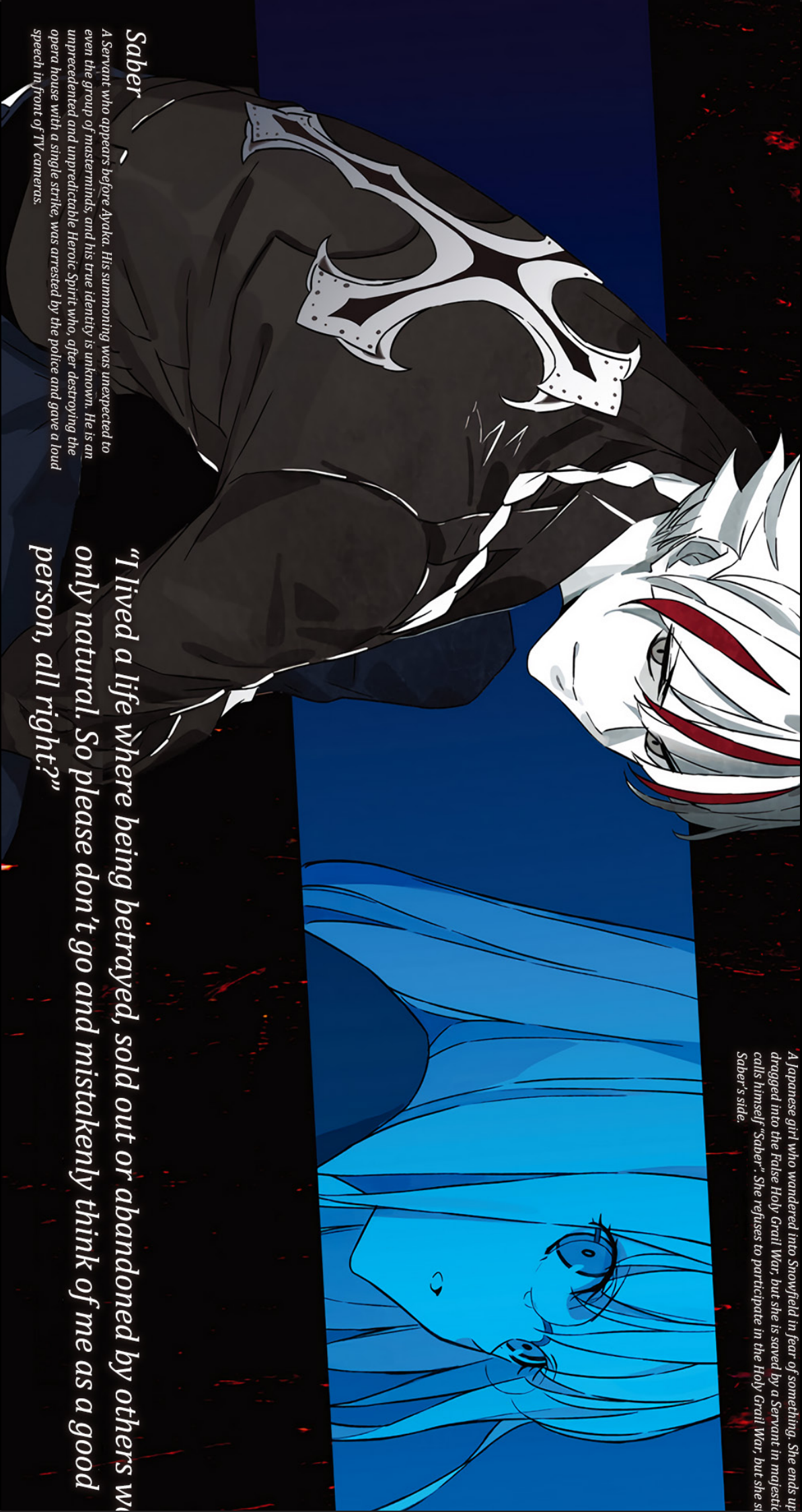
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Fate/strange Fake

フェイト/ストレンジ・フェイク



A Japanese girl who wandered into Snowfield in fear of something. She ends up dragged into the False Holy Grail War, but she is saved by a Servant in majestic calls himself "Saber". She refuses to participate in the Holy Grail War, but she stands by Saber's side.

Saber

A Servant who appears before Ayaka. His summoning was unexpected to even the group of masterminds, and his true identity is unknown. He is an unprecedented and unpredictable Heroic Spirit who, after destroying the opera house with a single strike, was arrested by the police and gave a loud speech in front of TV cameras.

"I lived a life where being betrayed, sold out or abandoned by others was only natural. So please don't go and mistakenly think of me as a good person, all right?"

Mysterious Bowman

The mysterious Servant who sprung a surprise attack on Gilgamesh as if to provoke him. He possesses enough power and skill to easily repel the "Gate of Babylon," making Gilgamesh acknowledge his strength. He is a Servant summoned in the True Holy Grail War.

Sigma

A young mercenary hired by Francesca. He was raised as a child soldier and belonged to a special unit that gathered soldiers with Magic Circuits. He was released from the army due to the political collapse of his country and now lives as a mercenary, mugs using his experiences and skills from his childhood.

Francesca

One of the leading masterminds behind the Holy Grail War in Snowfield. She wears gothic lolita clothing and has a cute appearance, but she is actually a pleasure-seeking and extremely cruel magus. She's colluding with the police chief Orlando and the magus Poldens.

Mysterious Horsewoman

The Servant who suddenly intervened in the battle between Gilgamesh and the mysterious bowman. She seems to possess a Noble Phantasm similar to the one the mysterious bowman used to attack Gilgamesh, and seems to have some past connection to him as well...

Bazdilot Cordelion

A ruthless magus who serves as a high-ranking member of the famous underworld mafia group the "Skradio Family" and has no compunctions about killing. He participates in the Holy Grail War as one of the Masters working for the side of the masterminds behind the war and summons a certain Heroic Spirit.

Archer

The King of Heroes Gilgamesh, summoned as the Archer Class in the Fake Holy Grail War. He has contracted with Tine Chelc, a member of Snowfield's aboriginal tribe. He is a Servant who possesses overwhelming power and Noble Phantasms.

Fate/Strange Fake

Volume 3

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Fate strange Fake

フェイト / ストレンジ フェイク

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a t e / s t r a n g e h a k

Extra

“ ”

—

“ — ”

The young man's mind recalled words that made him feel almost nostalgic.

“Listen well, listen well, brother: Those who would take from us, you must destroy.”

“Your parents were taken by people who came from outside. Your fathers were killed by invaders filled with the corruption of the outside. Your mother was kidnapped by a fearsome demon that came from outside.”

“So destroy them, O brother. Destroy those who would take from us.”

“So fight, o brother. Fight so that we may reclaim your mother.”

Next came a voice that he did not miss, but would probably never hear again.

“Wow. You must have guts, if you can look at what I've got here without flinching! Or maybe not... Hmm. Your substance is awfully thin. I've got some good news for you:

“You know that those wannabe mages who were always calling you ‘brother, brother’ are all dead?”

The young man who had recalled the two voices thought back on the emotions he had experienced when he had heard each of them. He had simply taken in the words, without anger or sadness. “I see,” had been his only thought. He had believed that to be natural, but when he had heard the last words — he had still been a boy at the time — he had realized.

“Oh, and your mom... died ages ago in a country called Japan.”

Realized that he, who felt nothing at those jeeringly-spoken words, might be just a little bit off compared to his brethren, who were screaming and wailing around him after being told the same thing.

I wonder why I'm remembering this now.

The young man walked alone through the wetlands. Military goggles hid his eyes, and he was outfitted with a number of weapons and mystic codes, but something about him felt subtly different from either a soldier or a mage.

Oh, of course.

As he continued his lone march, without allies or enemies, the young man removed his left

glove. A design like a tattoo swirling with magical energy, stood out ominously on the back of his hand. As he surveyed the Command Seals — the mark of a Master in the Holy Grail War — he narrowed his eyes with a hint of annoyance.

Because the person who gave birth to me died in another “Holy Grail War”...

In a proper Grail War, he had heard, the Holy Grail selected the mages who were worthy of bearing Command Seals. It was supposedly designed so that they would preferentially manifest in members of the three founding families — The Einzberns, the Makiri, and the Tōsaka — but no such partiality was built into the Snowfield Grail War. Two of the Command Seals for the Heroic Spirits summoned as sacrifices to prime the pump were scheduled to manifest in the chief of police and a mage of the Kuruoka family, while every single one of the seven Command Seals for summoning the true Heroic Spirits were set to manifest in people on the side of the masterminds behind this Holy Grail War.

“ ... ”

The young man glared wordlessly at his Command Seals. In his gaze there was neither confusion nor anger nor joy; no stir or shred of anything that could be called emotion.

The young man put on his glove, and continued down his lonely road in silence.

He was Sigma. It was not a name; merely a sign. It contained no wishes. It was no more than a Greek letter used to differentiate one of twenty-four “similar specimens.” Now that the greater part of those “specimens” had been lost, even its meaning as an identifier was disappearing.

Sigma was aware of his present occupation as that of a mercenary who could use some light magecraft. He spent his days carrying out his work dispassionately under employer who had pulled him over to “this side.”

The gist of the mission he had been given this time differed slightly from those he had previously undertaken. It consisted of participation in an operation far removed from ordinary warfare — the Holy Grail War.

That was all. He just had to summon something called a Heroic Spirit, and participate in the fighting. There was no need to support anyone else, or to proactively kill enemies.

“Once you’ve called up a Heroic Spirit, do whatever you feel like. You can run from place to place as needed, and even if you come to kill me, that’ll be fun in its own way! What they call a ‘revolution,’ you know? Just like what happened in your country!”

But is it really the same? The young man pondered, recalling the words his employer had de-

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livered in a mocking tone. Would my defying her be equated to the destruction of that country?

He seriously considered his employer's idle jibes for a while as he marched on, but he was ultimately unable to reach a conclusion.

That weird thing, the Holy Grail. I wonder if it would tell me if I asked it.

Just as his thoughts reached a point out of sync with both mages and ordinary humans, the young man arrived at his destination: a small mansion that stood in the midst of the wetlands, and which, at first glance, appeared deserted.

"The tools and stuff for the ritual are already there, so all you have to do is call! I've already taken care of the spare catalyst and everything! Oh, and you don't have to report what shows up, even to me. It's more fun when these things come as a surprise!"

Or so his employer had said, but Faldeus had warned him, "Be sure to report what Heroic Spirit you summon to me separately." Faldeus was not his direct employer, but the fact that Francesca, who was, had not forbidden him to speak must mean that it did not matter if he told Faldeus.

As to the possessions of the mage who had summoned one of the temporary Heroic Spirits, or what the Heroic spirit they had summoned had been, Sigma had no particular interest. He, who had no faith in any higher power, was unaware that the Heroic Spirit that had been summoned in the basement of this mansion was his total opposite. He was equally unaware that the thing he was about to summon would be hard to call a hero or a spirit — that it would be a yet stranger phenomenon.

It was dawn on the first day of the war. All the pieces were assembling on the twisted battleground called Snowfield, and still no one could even imagine the picture that they would ultimately form.

Interlude

“The End of Escape”

Interlude

The End of Escape

This is the story of a fugitive.

A woman who averted her eyes from her own sin, and turned her back on the “punishment”-closing in on her. She had no hope, no destination; she could not even see one step ahead on her road. Even so, she could not stop. She just kept running. Even knowing that there was nothing but destruction at the end of her road, the fugitive continued to cling to something.

In the town of Fuyuki, there was an apartment building called the Semina Apartments. It was the point where everything started, and, to her, it was the end of the world. Her memories of the time before those apartments no longer had any meaning for her. All of her extraneous past had been peeled off in flight after flight. All that remained to her now was consciousness of guilt and fear of punishment. That, and the figure of the girl-like “something” in a red hood that continued to watch her.

Whether it actually existed, or was an illusion brought on by her own awareness of guilt, even she did not know. In the end, as long as she could see it, it did not make much difference. At least, that was what she thought.

In search of salvation, she had even made her way to the church on a hill in Fuyuki. It was only a vague memory now, but she had a feeling that the priest there had told her something. It was only a feeling, because all her memories around that period were hazy.

“..., ____ will _____...”

“Could it be that _____ deal with...”

She knew that it was odd, but when she tried hard to remember, her head hurt.

“Ultimately, ____ is...”

Her inability to remember was strange, but the feeling that she must never go near that church again, at least, was carved deep into the fugitive’s instincts, like a wild animal’s aversion to fire.

Then she had fled the town of Fuyuki, and wandered aimlessly for months, then years. Always sensing the presence of “Red Riding Hood” in the dark behind her, in the black of night,

on the other side of the shadows birthed by city lights.

What should I do?

Unable to endure the strain, she continued to wander from place to place like a living corpse. At last, as if drawn by something, she returned to the town of Fuyuki.

She heard rumors in town that the priest had changed, but she still could not bring herself to make her way to the church. The Semina Apartments were supposed to be her home, but she could not return there, either. She just went on forcing her corpse to shamble around the town.

Then, while she was searching for someplace to go, she heard a rumor: "There's a Western-style house in the forest." When she heard other rumors about the house, such as that ghosts appeared there, she naturally found herself heading for it.

If the rumors were true, if ghosts did appear there, she had to see them with her own eyes. She had to see them so that she could be sure if the "Red Riding Hood" lurking in the darkness around her was of their kind. That was the reason she told herself, but she may just have been looking for a place to die.

But then, when she had heard similar rumors about the temple on the mountain, and made her way there, she had not managed to see anything but unusual fish making a commotion in the pond, so she did not expect much from rumors. In spite of that, she thought making her way to the forest was better than being in the city. At the very least, "Red Riding Hood" would not appear in the forest.

Following the rules she had discovered in her flight, she walked between the trees, which reminded her of a witch's forest in a fairy tale. Then an enormous, Western-style mansion, out of step with the atmosphere of the region, reared up in front of her. Before she could appreciate the eeriness of such a large house being constructed in secret, she was overwhelmed by the majestic appearance of the building. She might as well call it a castle.

The fugitive only surveyed the castle from a distance. She certainly never tried to go inside. She was afraid that such an enormous mansion might be fitted with some kind of service elevator.

"Red Riding Hood appears in elevators."

That was one of the rules. The reason went without saying.

She cautiously strolled around the castle. As she did so, she sensed a change in her own heart. What could it be? It's strangely, how should I put it... umm... calming. Yeah, that's it.

She did not know why, but she felt relieved for the first time in years. After that, she visited the castle in the forest many times. She never set foot inside it; just abandoned herself to the constant scenery.

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Then, several months later, she was visiting the castle as usual, when the voices of women arguing about something reached her ears. She was surprised by the first sign of people she'd encountered there, but she did not find it especially strange. A look at the flowers blooming in the garden was enough to make clear that someone was at least seeing to the upkeep of the place. She was curious to see what sort of people the castle's staff were, and quietly headed in the direction of the voices, keeping hidden in the shadows of the trees.

Soon, two women came into her view. At first glance, she thought they must be twins, or at least sisters. That was because their distinguishing features were so much alike. Their beautiful silver hair was so clear that she mistook it for pure white, and their white skin put her in mind of a snowfield. Their red eyes, recognizable even from a distance, matched as well.

The pair of them appeared to be arguing about something, but one seemed to be trying to persuade the other, while the other's demeanor suggested she was merely giving vent to her anger.

"There's not a scrap of sense in such a thing! Filia, what on earth are you—"

"Enough! I won't rely on you people... I'll see it through myself!"

Who could they be? Maybe this castle is some foreign billionaire's vacation home, and those two are their staff? The fugitive wondered as she observed the "white women." It seemed to her, however, that an aura of difference, greater than that of foreigners, surrounded the women. Almost like they had snuck out of a fairy tale...

While the fugitive was busy indulging in fantastic suppositions, she completely failed to notice that she had not fully concealed her presence.

"Even if it means abandoning the name of Einzbern, I will—"

At that point, the enraged woman suddenly froze.

"...Who's there?"

The woman's face, from which she erased all expression as she turned to look at her, seemed incredibly beautiful. And that was as far as she went. Her memories after meeting the white woman's eyes became hazy, just like those of her visit to the church. Probably, she had been placed under suggestion or something of the sort using magecraft. The fact that such things existed was hammered into her head later by the white woman.

"Are you ____? Or ____."

Unlike with the church, she felt no sense of aversion toward the castle or the white women themselves.

"What sort of coincidence? It couldn't be ____..."

"It couldn't be so... No, it doesn't matter."

Interlude

The groaning deep inside her brain whenever she tried to remember what had happened then, however, was the same. She felt sure she must have been placed under suggestion, or something like it. Or perhaps it was the same as what that priest and ____ had done to her at the church.

____.

Something that had been with the priest. When she tried to remember that being, her brain creaked and her memories blurred.

The woman at the castle and the priest. She knew very well that it was those two who had guided her down this path when she had been a mere fugitive, but however she tried, she could not remember what had been said to her when she had met them. The hazy, black and white memories went on swirling through her brain like the split halves of a yin-yang.

But she did remember one thing that the priest had said to the “something” beside him.

“Its fate has piqued my interest. Did you not do the same for me, once?”

And she remembered just one thing the white woman had said to her at the castle.

“You have no right to choose your own fate. I shall give your life meaning.”

The word “fate,” etched into both the priest’s and the white woman’s statements, had become a malediction, and in the end, the fugitive had been carried along by her surroundings and put Japan behind her, just as the white woman said. Even now, when the fugitive — Ayaka Sajou — had been drawn into a mystical war in America, she continued to wander in search of answers.

How can my crimes be forgiven?

What in the world am I supposed to do in this city...?

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×

America. Snowfield. In a nightclub.

The basement of a rundown building in the city center.

A stage for live musical performances had been erected in the space, which could not be called spacious, and a pastoral melody resounded across it. The tone and melody of the tune, which was blasting out of an electric guitar amp, seemed mismatched at first, but it gradually picked up speed, added a peculiar rhythm, and metamorphosed into a sound suited to the atmosphere of an electric guitar in a nightclub. It was almost like the melody was being remade to suit the instrument as it was played.

Once he had finished the tune, the player spoke.

“There... How was that?”

The man holding the electric guitar did not match even the initial, pastoral music. He was clad in magnificent armor, and a breeze from the air conditioning stirred his blonde hair, streaked with red. At the Heroic Spirit’s — Saber’s — words, a number of wide-eyed men and women around him launched into a flurry of excited replies.

“Woah... You rock! Was that seriously your first time?”

“Amazing... You’ve got style. I was sure you were an up-and-coming comedian or something.”

The boisterous men and women all wore their hair in gaudy, multi-colored mohawks, and their entire bodies were girded with clothes, piercings, and tattoos of otherworldly designs. They looked like personifications of the word “thorny,” but their faces wore friendly smiles, and they were all admiring the man who looked, in a sense, the most otherworldly of them all.

“You expect us to believe you’ve never played a guitar before? ...Or so I’d like to say, but I get the weird feeling that you’re not lying...”

“I don’t want to sound vulgar, but you could get paid for that performance.”

Saber shook his head, looking pleased but bashful.

“Oh, I can’t hold a candle to professionals such as yourselves. This is the first time I’ve touched one of these ‘electric guitars,’ but I did learn a stringed instrument something like it a long time ago.”

“I’m telling you, you’re plenty good! Speaking of which, what was that tune? I’ve never heard it before.”

“Oh, once, a long time ago I made a blunder and got captured,” Saber replied, smiling as if it a fond memory. “I just tried speeding up the rhythm of a tune I composed on a whim while I was imprisoned.”

“You mean you can compose, too? And you’re an ex-con?”

“You’re him right? The guy who got arrested on TV earlier, and gave that speech?”

Interlude

Saber nodded, a little bashfully, in answer to a question from a woman in punk clothing.

“You were watching, then. Well, my words were too few to call a speech, but...”

“Wait, did you break out of jail? That’s pretty cool.”

“We merely evacuated in the confusion following what happened to the police station. It is not for me to judge whether or not that’s considered a jailbreak,” Saber replied courteously, shrugging his shoulders. The gaggle of young people around him grew even more excited.

“Man, that was amazing! What was it? That explosion, I mean?”

“It looked like the hotel got hit pretty hard too.”

“Speaking of which, I heard somebody won so big at the casino earlier you wouldn’t believe it...”

“...”

A figure leaned its back against a corner of the stage, listening to the young people’s conversation without a word. The woman who was supposed to be a solitary fugitive — Ayaka Sajou — gave her head a big shake, and groaned inwardly.

Is this supposed to be my fate?

At the end of her flight, she had arrived at a nightclub. She was surrounded by young people dressed in punk fashion — nothing like anyone she’d known in Fuyuki — and a meddling Heroic Spirit who kept fearlessly stepping over her boundaries.

“Say, I feel embarrassed in front of professionals such as yourselves, but I’ve just thought of a new tune. Would you mind if I played it?”

“Sure, go ahead. We’re looking forward to hearing what sounds jump out too.”

“Thank you! Would you listen closely as well, Ayaka? I’d like to ask your feelings later.”

She glared at Saber, who had begun to strum the electric guitar again as he spoke. At length, she heaved a sigh of self-reproach, as if to deny the part of her that felt just a little moved by his playing.

What in the world am I doing?

Prologue VIII

“The Star Performers’ Feast (Part 1)”

Prologue VIII

The Star Performers' Feast (Part 1)

The night before the war. Somewhere in Snowfield.

On the outskirts of the city of Snowfield was a small industrial district where rows of factories stood. Deep within this district, practically walled off by the enormous factories around it, was a modest meat processing plant. It only operated seasonally, probably because the local stockraising industry was not exactly flourishing, and few of the city's residents were even aware of its existence.

The basement of that factory, however, concealed another face, one that had not been cleared with the Business Registry. It was a mage's workshop, constructed within a many-layered Bounded Field in a subterranean space far larger than the area of the lot.

Even the surrounding factories, which appeared unrelated at first glance, were, when one traced their ownership far enough, all ultimately linked to a single organization: the Scladio Family.

It was a mafia lead by Galvarosso Scladio, who had won fame in the underworld for his cunning ability. Although it was called a mafia, its structure differed from the proper Mafia organization that had its origin in Sicily. It was true that Galvarosso Scladio's bloodline had distant ties to the Sicilian Mafia, but he had enlarged his organization by joining hands with or absorbing a multitude of different organizations, creating a faceless mob unconnected with national borders, bloodlines, or ideologies.

The unusual name Galvarosso was a pseudonym. According to one theory, he had come up with it by crossing "Barbarossa," the nickname of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, with his own real name.

And he had spread his roots far, wide, and deep into the American criminal underworld.

Historians of crime, the FBI, and even TV commentators had attempted to rationalize how the man who had boasted that he would recreate the Holy Roman Empire in America had actually amassed enough political and economic power to justify calling himself emperor, but not many knew the true reason.

He had patronized a large number of mages over a wide area, both in and outside of the country's borders. Mages who had lost turf wars with other families; mages who had gone bankrupt, their fortunes unable to keep up with their quests for new heights of magecraft; mages who had

been driven out of their original lands as heretics; mages who had been loudly expelled from public society as criminals, and were considered nuisances and burdens in magical society; even some mages who had knocked on his door of their own accord — he had become a patron to all mages in a wide variety of circumstances, and supported their activities, not only with direct donations of money, but also by furnishing them with land, and using his public power to remove the mages who had previously occupied it.

A little political pressure or violence was nothing to a powerful mage. When it came to ruffians with knowledge of suggestion and mesmerism, as well as sniping and court orders, however, the number capable of completely defending themselves was, naturally, limited. Even a famous Clock Tower lecturer or a mage well-known in their own field would require a specialized Mystic Code to defend against an unexpected bullet, unless they were of such high ability that they were capable of handling the situation with the power of their Crest alone. Otherwise, even a mage could die all too quickly to a chance encounter with rioting hooligans or a random attack on the street.

Ordinarily such a case would have been viewed as a problem by the Clock Tower and the Church, and immediately crushed. By the time the subject of the Scladio Family came up for discussion, however, they had already obtained a degree of power in magical society.

But would a collection of mages really band together to protect a criminal organization? There were many who doubted, but the mages under the protection of the Scladio Family did, in fact, make free use of their power to defend their patron.

The greatest reason for that was that Galvarosso took no interest in the fruits of their efforts as mages. Not only would he not steal the fruits of their labors; he would not even pry into the nature of their researches if the mages did not wish to disclose them. The mages simply told him what they needed, and the Scladio Family did not hesitate to provide it.

Many of the mages accustomed to this one-sided relationship felt that their path to the Root — their ultimate objective — would be closed if they lost it. Only a very few of the mages felt any real obligation to the Scladio Family; most voluntarily aligned themselves with the organization after rationally considering their own interests as mages.

As a result, the Scladio Family displayed unparalleled rapid growth in the underworld. There were other organizations that knew of the existence of mages, and turned their hands in that direction. Most of these, however, attempted to rule mages with force, and ended up being used themselves, or even destroyed, by elementary suggestion and the like.

Ultimately, the Scladio Family had attached itself to a division of the government, and gained enough power to get involved in the Snowfield Plan. Enough power to nominate one of the mages who was to be a Master in the fake Holy Grail War.

And, this evening, the doors of the meat processing plant opened, and several men stepped into the cold air inside. As they did so, the similarly hard-faced group that was already inside nodded to the newcomers.

“Glad to see you made it.”

“What about Mr. Cordelion?”

“He’s already left the Correction Center, but he’s not here yet,” a man — seemingly an underling — answered, his brow bathed in cold sweat. The newcomers scowled.

“Didn’t you go to welcome him?”

“Faldeus said it wouldn’t look good if anyone from the Scladio Family came to the Correction Center... We only know he was released from a report after the fact...”

“Tch... Who’s that government lapdog think he is?”

“I’m sorry. The younger guys are out looking for Mr. Cordelion as we—”

The sharp sound of something being crushed cut off the rest of his words.

“!?”

In unison, the men looked in the direction the noise had come from — the roof of the plant.

Smashed window glass tumbled, sparkling, through the air. A man fell with it, seemingly clad in its radiance, clutching a lump in each hand.

“Wha—”

The things in the falling man’s hands were two human heads. Not severed heads, however — their bodies were still attached. The two bodies fell through the window, the man pulling them down with him, and within a few seconds they had been smashed against the concrete floor. Blood spit from their mouths; apparently they had still been alive.

The man who had dragged the pair through the window slowly rose to his feet, heedless of the fact that several drops of their blood had splattered on his face. Despite the fact that he had fallen from the skylight as well, the man wore no expression on his face, as if nothing had happened.

A shiver ran down the spines of the hard-faced men in the plant when they saw the man’s face illuminated by the moonlight that filtered in through the broken window. They had been overpowered by the man’s eyes, which were a deeper darkness in the darkened plant.

The man wore black gloves, and an air of severity. His eyes, however, were completely lacking “humanity.” There was a light in them close to that in the eyes of a bird of prey or a carnivorous beast. Rather than targeting prey, however, they gave the impression of freezing hearts with their glare alone.

“They’re not the eyes of a cold, emotionless killing machine, like hitmen sometimes have. If the machine had just one emotion — the urge to kill — it might get eyes like that,” Galvarosso,

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the boss of the Scladio Family, had put it. The was how piercing the distinctive gleam in the man's eyes was.

He appeared to be in his 30s or 40s. His features themselves may have been well-regulated, but that monstrous, piercing gleam in his eyes seized the soul of anyone who stood before them. The hard-faced men, however, were not afraid of that gleam. They knew. Knew that the man's insides were far more frightening than his piercing glare.

"M, Mr. Cordelion!"

"..."

The man whose name had been called did not return the men's stares. He just reached into his pocket. When they saw what he took out of it, the men lying on the floor widened their eyes.

"Wai—"

One of them started to say something, but no more words came. Round after round fired from a handgun fitted with a suppressor, each accompanied by a muffled thud, destroying the prone bodies.

Even after he had confirmed that the two lumps of meat had completely stopped moving, the man did not relax his guard. He continued to stare down at the floor, gripping the handgun tight.

"Uh, umm... Mr. Cordelion? Who are they?" One of the men who had been in the plant from the start asked, his whole body breaking out in a cold sweat.

At that, the man called Cordelion spit out a voice so deep that it might have sounded from the depths of hell. His gaze remained motionless.

"...Flies."

"Flies, sir?"

"Perhaps someone let a whiff of meat get out. Their sense of smell must have been up to the task."

The man's manner of speaking caused the men to look at each other in surprise.

"You mean they were another mage's spies, Mr. Cordelion? After your Command Seals?"

"...Clean them up."

"Y, yes sir!"

The hard-faced men — apparently his subordinates — hurriedly set to work cleaning up the corpses and blood spatter.

"There are more outside. They erected a barrier to keep anyone from seeing them," the man added, matter-of-factly.

"What!? How could there be so many!?"

The hard-faced men felt fear, both because they were surrounded by hostile mages, and be-

cause they had committed the blunder of completely failing to notice.

"There are thirty-six," the man declared.

"Thirty..."

"Six here, and thirty outside. Take care of them quickly," he continued to his dumbfounded subordinate.

"Yes sir! ...What?"

There were only two corpses on the floor of the plant.

"Are they up there?"

Could there be another four corpses on the roof? The hard-faced underling assumed so, and was wondering how to get them down, when... more muffled thuds echoed. The instant they all looked up, the man's gun spit fire, and air holes opened in the craniums of the four men who had entered just before him.

"Wha—"

The men who had been in the plant from the start tensed, uncomprehending.

"M, Mr. Cordelion, what are you...?"

"I don't mind them taking me lightly."

"Huh?"

"But this plant belongs to the Scladio Family. If they thought they could enter this sacred place with disguises like that, it was a grave insult to Mr. Scladio. They weren't worth taking alive."

The next instant, the faces of the men who had become fresh corpses began to distort, revealing entirely different ones.

"!?"

They must have been enemy mages disguised as allies. Were their real comrades still alive, or had they already been disposed of?

"...Once you've finished cleaning up the 'meat,' come downstairs," the man who had slaughtered more than thirty mages in this short span of time addressed his subordinates without any change in his complexion, as if to say that he would not even give them time to consider such questions.

"I have the catalyst. I'm going to summon the Servant."

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Snowfield. Somewhere dim.

“Bazdilot Cordelion. On the surface, he’s the CEO of an industrial waste treatment company. Behind that, he’s one of the leaders of the Scladio Family...” Faldeus Dioland recited.

“And behind that, he’s the Massacre Mage Bazdilot, the ‘Scladio Toxic Shark’!” The girl sitting next to him — Francesca — cut in. “His behind’s behind isn’t his front; it’s another side entirely! It’s things like this that make life fun!”

“It’s merely troublesome. And what were those nicknames? There’s nothing about a ‘Toxic Shark’ or a ‘Massacre Mage’ in my files.”

“That makes sense; I just gave them to him.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear it.”

Faldeus gave Francesca — who was happily flapping her legs on the sofa — a sidelong glance.

“He is suspected of being concerned with more than one hundred and twenty murder cases,” he continued, looking at the documents in his hands. “In all of them, however, the evidence is insufficient. Apparently they managed to put him away on a collection of misdemeanors. In the first prison he was sent to, however, three guards and twenty-six prisoners went ‘missing’ within six months. He claimed the whole prison for the Scladio Family... It must have been hard work covering that up.”

“Maybe he picked people they could cover up to disappear? It sounds like he more or less pays attention to magical secrecy for Scladio’s sake. He might actually be using their infamy as a gang to cover up his being a mage.”

“Although his career as a mage is about as violent as you can get... He comes of a lineage adapted to a rather twisted school of ‘domination.’ Magecraft that focuses on dominating not others, but oneself... It apparently differs from physical reinforcement, but the details are unclear. He may also be versed in a school of the far-eastern folk magic that the Clock Tower holds in contempt, etc.”

Faldeus narrowed his eyes as he went on reading the materials, as if tired.

“He is suspected in connection to the murders of several mages, and was apparently being watched by the Department of Justice Administration. As a result of a certain incident, however, he had a confrontation with Sponheim Abbey... in the middle of which, he came under the protection of the Scladio Family.”

“Oh, Sponheim. You know, I hear they were in a mess just then because of the next abbot going missing, or something like that? Otherwise, not even the Scladio Family could’ve covered for him,” Francesca cackled.

“I’m still opposed, Ms. Francesca,” Faldeus griped. “I mean, bringing a man with this many enemies into this Holy Grail War, going as far as releasing him from prison. If we’re not careful,

it could bridge the gaps between the Clock Tower's factions and bring them all down on us together. Even if that is still within expectations, we could easily come under fire from directions we can't even guess at."

"You say that, but the others are pretty similar. Sigma, and little Doris, the youngest daughter of the Lusendra family of reinforcement mages from the far north, entered the country illegally. Cashura used orthodox domination and projection magecraft to wreak all kinds of havoc on Wall Street, and Haruri's the enfant terrible of witchcraft. And then there's Faldeus, who betrayed the Clock Tower! Yup, pretty much nothing but problem children."

"I have confidence that I can control that lineup, myself included. You and Bazdilot Cordelion, however, are a different story."

Faldeus narrowed his eyes, turned to Francesca, and launched into something like a roundabout lecture.

"Is it really alright to let a man like him have a thing like that?"

"It's fine; don't worry about it. It might've been getting more than even I could handle, and no one knows what the future holds, so what does it matter?"

"We have no intention of playing along with your hedonism. When the need arises, we may need to force both you and Bazdilot to leave the stage."

"Ooh, scary. Are you going to have me sniped? No, you'll want to finish me off for certain, so maybe a bombing?"

Faldeus' icy tone made it clear that his words were no joke, but Francesca burst out laughing like a child who had just heard one. Her cheeks flushed faintly with excitement, in the full knowledge that it was no empty threat.

"Still, that might be nice too. Playing with you guys is definitely an option. I'm no patriot; I wasn't even born or raised in America to begin with."

"..."

Faldeus refused to listen to Francesca's jokes. He waited to see what she would do, circulating magical energy through his body. Francesca saw through his wariness, but continued to lounge on the sofa, deliberately defenseless.

"The time the Elder Title and the last gold wolf wrecked each other was what decided whether a country would sink or swim and all, so when it's time to play, it got to be big and flashy, like this Grail War! Oh, just imagining it's got me all excited! The United States of America versus the beautiful girl mage! It's got a nice ring to it!"

"There's nothing nice about it. And don't entertain the presumptuous idea that an individual could prevail against our proud nation. I hear that the agency has 'erased' you twice in the past."

"Oh, yeah! I got rubbed out, alright! It really hurt, you know? Quantity sure is scary!"

Fate/Strange Fake 3

Francesca confirmed that she had been disposed of by the state as indifferently as if the fact had nothing to do with her.

“...I can’t understand it. Not what the government is thinking, joining forces with you again, even if it has been decades, and not your nerve, joining forces with the government that tried to erase you from existence.”

“It means your superiors think that highly of my ability, and I don’t sweat the small stuff. That’s all there is to it. Besides, I’m used to having my body killed.”

“I believe I understand your mode of existence, but that’s still an unbelievable statement.”

“Getting my body killed is no cause for despair or anything. In the first place, only one person’s ever really killed me. Well, plenty of people have killed my body, but I think I can count the number who’ve made me say uncle.”

She stared into space, as if reminiscing about the past, and loudly gnashed her teeth as she laughed.

“Let me see... I think Old Man Kishua was first. Saint-Germain the hedonist; the fairy-tale witch who lives forever — oh, I guessed it’s ‘lived’ forever now — then there was that rich blood-sucker in Monaco... and a teacher at some school who uses Godo Word, a super old dialect... and speaking of teachers, there were also my masters in magecraft, and...”

The litany of names and words made Faldeus, who was versed in every secret corner of magical society, wonder if it was some kind of joke. The final nickname out of Francesca’s mouth, however, sparked a particularly strong recollection in him.

“Oh! And that girl! Scar Red!”

“...It’s more than your life’s worth to call her that to her face.”

The peculiar nickname, charged with both scorn and awe, belonged to one of the Clock Tower’s greatest mages, a genius puppeteer who far outranked Faldeus and Rohngall. Among mages affiliated with the Clock Tower, it was simultaneously rather famous and an absolute taboo.

That woman mage, who had ultimately achieved the rank of Grand, had been granted a “Color” — effectively a title — by the Clock Tower. She had not been able to obtain her coveted title of “Blue,” however, and had ended up receiving a shade close to “Red”; not even the actual primary color. She harbored an abnormal hatred of the aforementioned nickname, which she had been given sarcastically as a result. It was rumored that she would kill anyone who used it to her face, without exception. Faldeus knew that it was no mere rumor; it was the undeniable truth.

Although... I suppose Ms. Francesca might actually do it...

“Yup, even I was no exception,” Francesca cackled, as if she had guessed Faldeus’ thoughts. “I

said it to her face, and I ended up getting killed a whole bunch of times!”

After her laughter had subsided, Francesca puffed up her cheeks and looked a little cross.

“It really was awful, you know? You see, she’s stubborn, and crafty, and she smashes up people’s workshops and swipes whatever strikes her fancy, and even when you turn the tables and kill her instead, she just activates the _____ built into her body, and then she comes back acting all innocent. After she’d killed me about thirteen times, I put in a request with her family and got them to intercede, but...”

Francesca sighed and shook her head. Presumably something had happened between her and the “family.”

“In the end, she killed me one last time, and threatened me, all, ‘never show your twisted Magic Circuits in front of me again’! And that’s how I ended up in this body.”

At that point Francesca regained her grin, and flexed her body alluringly. “What do you think?” The gesture seemed to ask. Faldeus, however, did not turn a hair, and raised a question of his own.

“You got that body roughly three years ago, correct? Is that the reason you were strongly opposed when the higher ups at the time suggested hiring her?”

“Well, that was part of it... Either way, I bet she would’ve turned you down. She only takes jobs that suit her tastes. Apparently her family values interest over money. Oh, but she might have cooperated if you’d asked her to make a puppet that incarnates Heroic Spirits.”

When she had finished talking about mages who were not currently directly involved in this Grail War, Francesca suddenly wiped the grin from her face.

“I may not be one to talk, but the memory copies in Scar Red’s puppets are perfect. So perfect that it makes me wonder if she even copies her soul.”

“That’s...”

Faldeus started to say something in response to the girl’s words, but then he furrowed his brows and thought better of it. Francesca then casually spoke the words he had hesitated to.

“You’re wondering if she might’ve arrived at the Third Magic, right? Well, if she has, it’d make everything we’re doing a farce, and that would be hilarious! Ha ha!”

The girl burst into another fit of laughter. Faldeus, across from her, heaved another sigh, and the wrinkles on his brow deepened.

“There’s nothing funny about it. I would be a lost to not only this country, but to magical society in general.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure the Third Magic will stop being Magic before long. Speaking of which, did you forget you guys’ ultimate goal? ‘Drag the Third Magic down to the level of magecraft?’”

“...Our goal? Don’t you mean yours?”

Fate/Strange Fake 3

"It's on my list, but it's just one stop on the way. I think we'll be able to reproduce it once the pioneers of the stars advance a few more levels. Same for the Holy Grail War itself. So, I'm going to be starting as many Grail Wars as I can. I'd like you guys to show some enthusiasm analyzing its pattern."

Francesca's tone had grown gentle, as if out of affection for something. Faldeus' eyes widened.

"I was certain you were aiming to become the master of the Third Magic."

"What a surprise," Francesca laughed. Then she stretched out her legs on the sofa, and leapt energetically to her feet.

"Upsy-daisy... Well, Scar Red aside, let's just leave it that it's not even possible, given my nature... What'd be the fun be in a mage like me becoming a Magician this late in the game?"

"...Those don't sound like the words of someone who was just calling other 'hedonists,' and 'families that don't act unless they're interested.'"

"Did I say I was any different? Although, I am cuter than those two."

"..."

Faldeus' face said that he was exasperated beyond words. The smile Francesca flashed was unlike the innocent grins she had worn so far. There was something mature and bewitching about it.

"Magecraft, which people can recreate, is fine. But Magic defines human limits. We'd be better off without it. I believe that, and I also believe the folly of facing that wall is human nature."

Then she quietly shut her eyes, as if pondering the future of the "festival" that was about to begin.

"Whether it's rooted in bottomless virtue... or malice with no upper limit."

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The meat processing plant. Basement.

"I would ask that you answer my question, O mage."

A "great hero." Or else something that left even such words in its wake.

"Is it you who is to become my Master, and assign me trials?"

There was no other way to describe the being that had manifested in the basement of the meat processing plant, surrounded by a multi-layered barrier.

“You’re the one to decide that, not me,” the man who had summoned him, Bazdilot Cordelion, replied coolly.

The suit-clad mages who served him, meanwhile, were making their Magic Circuits tremble as they broke out in cold sweats. One look was all it had taken to make them understand that the entity that had just manifested belonged on a different plane from themselves.

First, its stature exceeded human bounds. It looked like a statue carved by a god. More than two and a half meters in height, the tips of its hair brushed the ceiling. It was a great, muscular man, but every fiber of his muscles, and every drop of blood in his veins, was overflowing with Od so pure it could be called divine. The mages got the impression that his body alone would be sufficient to easily dispel even large-scale magecraft that required a group to cast, not to mention their mediocre spells.

The mere atmosphere he exuded was enough to dominate the room. A mere few seconds of his conduct was enough to make those who saw him feel that he was practically divine. If this Heroic Spirit were to go out of control, there would be nothing they could do, and whatever this Heroic Spirit did, they would have to accept that it was the right thing. Such fantasies began to seize Bazdilot’s men in the presence of the perfect figure.

The Heroic Spirit was, in fact, capable of slaughtering every human in the room bare-handed. In contrast to the pressure exerted by his body and his magical energy, however, he stood in the center of the workshop with the calm bearing of a gentleman.

That, however, only made the Heroic Spirit’s exceptional nature more obvious, and all the mages there, except for Bazdilot, had their brain’s continually rocked by the urge to flee. This was no place for worthless mages like themselves. They were looking on a being it was not right for them to look on.

And yet, not one of them moved. Their fear was being kept in check by a greater fear. They could not run away while Bazdilot was still there. That was the only reason.

“_____.”

“_____.”

Bazdilot was discussing something with the Heroic Spirit, but the men did not hear it. It was a conversation between a being that was far more than human, and their own ruler. By the time they did manage to make out the words, the Heroic Spirit’s expression had clouded over. Faced with a Heroic Spirit in an obvious ill humor, their superior, Bazdilot, remained expressionless.

“Well? Answer the question.”

“...”

Fate/Strange Fake 3

"I asked you if, in order to achieve victory in battle, you could kill a small child with your own hands."

"I could not. If any person would order such a thing, that person is my enemy."

A solemn voice flowed from the lips of the expressionless hero.

"Are you... testing me?"

An invisible pressure caused a wind to gust through the workshop as he spoke. It was pure might; not magical energy. A presence so weighty that an ordinary human could hardly help losing their life from suffering it head-on robbed the mage's of their freedom of movement.

"If you speak thus, knowing my origins... I judge that you have taken your life in your hands."

From the perspective of the extraneous mages, those words, delivered with such force, sounded like nothing less than a sentence of death. They prepared themselves to become collateral damage. And yet, they felt no hatred for their superior; only fear mixed with resignation.

That superior — unfazed in the face of the pressure that threatened to crush him, room and all — returned the hero's glare with that inhuman gleam in his eyes, and gave his answer.

"Naturally. I threw my life away a long time ago."

Then he held his right hand aloft, making the design on its back shine.

"By my Command Seal, I order you:"

"...Foolish."

The Heroic Spirit shook his head, judging that the man intended to impose his dominance by means of a Command Seal.

Restraints effected by means of a Command Seal were merely momentary. He knew that he could easily shake them off with his own magical energy. Even if he was ordered to kill himself with all three Command Seals, he judged that three suicides more or less would not pose a problem. He decided, however, that if the attempt would teach the mage the futility of binding him with Command Seals, and help him to understand his place, he would not prevent the mage from wasting one Seal.

The Heroic Spirit was too noble. Had he been the type to stick at nothing in the face of danger, he would have smashed in the mage's head or sent it flying before he could finish activating his Command Seals. In fact, if he had been summoned as Rider or Assassin, he would probably have done just that. When summoned as one of the three knights, as he was now, however, his aspect as a "faultless hero," handed down in epics, came strongly to the fore. Accordingly, he had taken on a dignity that resembled a form of chivalry.

That created a fatal chink in the armor of that great hero beyond human understanding. For

the order barked at him by means of a Command Seal was no demand for an oath of loyalty.

“Do not makes excuses.”

The hero let out a startled cry as one of Bazdilot’s Command Seals shone... and its potent magical energy began to eat its way into his brain.

Impossible.

Even including past Grail Wars, the hero’s magical energy was top class. The witches of the age of the gods would be one thing, but no modern mage should be capable of interfering with his mind. But, although it was through a Command Seal, “something” in the mage before his eyes had begun to jolt his brains. The hero recalled that he had experienced a similar gnawing sensation once before. Something of the same kind was being loosed into him by the man before his eyes.

“What... have you...”

“There is no need to hide your crimes, or your regrets. Lay bare your depths. I will see it all.”

Bazdilot, still expressionless, tempted the hero in a voice that seemed to sound from the depths of hell.

“I do not need your power as a hero. I need the avarice that will drive you to stick at nothing for the sake of your goal. I need the deluded conviction that will drive a man to choose any vicious means without hesitation, even in pursuit of noble ends,” he murmured to the now motionless Heroic Spirit, and raised his left hand a second time.

“By my Command Seal, I order you once more: remember the humans you have seen.”

There must have been some special meaning in those words. Otherwise, they must have been charged with some malefic intent.

The Command Seal, become a mass of magical energy, took the order that shook the hero’s ears and caused it to seep deep into his brain.

His vision flickered. In the intervals, the faces of all the human beings the hero had encountered in life floated. There were distant descendents of gods among them, but before him they had all been no more than “mere humans.”

A tyrant, a picture of cowardice, wailed, too frightened to stand:

“I understand! I’ll praise you! On my honor as king, I’ll praise you!”

“S-so don’t come any closer, monster!”

A blond man, remarkable for his haughty bearing, said:

*“Incredible! I’m jealous! The rumors were true: you are a monster! Have no fear. I will treat you well, and put you to good use. So long as you are with me, you are a monster no more.
“You are a great hero, the guardian of a future king.”*

Just before she had chosen her own death, the woman he had loved said:

*“You’ve done nothing wrong.
“So please, don’t curse the world. Don’t hate your own blood.
“You’re strong, so I’m sure you can do it.
“I couldn’t.”*

Just before he stove his head in and flung him into the flames, what should have been an enemy soldier had said:

“Fath—”

Human figures piled up, many, many layers deep, without regard for the order he had met them, and vanished. As if they were calling to each other, an unnatural volume of magical energy came pouring into him through the Command Seal.

Impossible. No human of this time possesses this much magical energy! It’s like... a witch of my own era...

The matchless hero fell silently to his knees on the spot.

Confronted with that unbelievable scene, Bazdilot’s men were baffled. A being of a clearly higher order was suffering before a mage, their own superior.

A Master-Servant relationship.

Everyone who beheld that scene understood that it could not be explained away so simply. They did, however, realize that a definite toll had been exacted.

In the Holy Grail War, the Command Seals that each Master possessed amounted to lifelines. They were trump cards capable of enforcing an order or prohibition on a Servant, and even feats, such as instantaneous transportation and emergency escape, that approached Magic. And Bazdilot had spent two of his three. When they considered that the last remaining Command

Seal had to held in reserve in case the Servant rebelled, Bazdilot effectively had no more usable Command Seals for the duration of the Grail War.

The mages felt worried that he had taken on a definite handicap, but a species of trust, which accompanied their fear, put their minds at ease that Bazdilot would manage somehow. That ease, however, collapsed just a few seconds later.

“By my Command Seal, I order you once more:”

The words froze the mages in the underground workshop. Bazdilot was going to expend all three of his Command Seals in his summoning. Faced with their superior committing an action so foolish that even a child, if they were familiar with the Grail War, would not do it, the mages prepared to die this time for certain.

The Heroic Spirit, meanwhile, also resolved himself as he held back the magical energy worming its way into him.

This mage is dangerous.

He did not see Bazdilot expending his final Command Seal as folly. He had realized that, although it did not show in his expression, the mage was taking his life in his hands. He was gambling his whole existence in order to transmute the Heroic Spirit into something else.

Whatever order he gives with his final Command Seal, I must at least eliminate this man.

Even the Heroic Spirit was not able to grasp the nature of the power eating into him. If he was not careful, however, this corrosion could spread to the other Heroic Spirits who had been summoned for the Holy Grail War. Even as he desperately suppressed the curse from his own lifetime welling up inside him, the great hero remained noble.

I must stop him. I must stop the wicked tyrant who would dominate this era.

Even as the mental pollution passed a point that would likely drive most Servants mad, this great hero still reached out his hand, not to defend himself, but for the sake of the other Heroic Spirits and the inhabitants of this era, who he had not yet even met. He did not care if he was called unprincipled. He did not care if he was called a mad spirit that turned his hands against his own Master. The man famed as a hero among heroes was determined to throw even his own honor to the winds, and slay the mage in front of him for the sake of someone he had not yet see.

Then, just as he had shaken off the mental pollution and his hand was about to reach the mage's neck... Bazdilot spent his last Command Seal, as if to sneer at the hero's nobility.

“Accept human nature — the robe of earth.”

Everyone in the workshop, except for Bazdilot himself, saw “it.” The moment that Bazdilot had expended all his Command Seals, another, reddish-brown tattoo peeked out of his left cuff... and began to squirm like some ghastly creature.

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In the gloom.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve got to start preparations for my summoning.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. I want to take my time watching Artie get summoned on my own, anyway,” Francesca said, flapping her legs. She had shifted herself from the sofa to the bed.

Observing that, Faldeus issued one last warning.

“Ms. Francesca, I am well aware of the carnage you’ve been through. An amateur mage such as myself, however, cannot help being concerned.”

At that point, Faldeus narrowed his eyes, and made no attempt to conceal his hostility toward the man called Bazdilot as he continued.

“Was it really alright to give that man ‘it’?”

“Does it bother you that much? But not even I could contrive enough magical energy to run the Heroic Spirit you can summon with that catalyst at full spec, you know? It really does take the combo of Baz and the Scradios for that.”

“I’m not talking about the catalyst. I’m talking about the ‘byproduct’ you brought back from Fuyuki.”

“Oh,” Francesca nodded, and flashed a malicious grin. “That couldn’t be helped. I mean, me and Baz are about the only ones who can handle ‘it,’ much less grow it, with our egos intact...”

“And I don’t want to always be touching that repulsive ‘mud’! Ahaha!”

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The meat processing plant.

It was a bizarre scene.

The reddish-brown something that had flowed into the Heroic Spirit’s body along with the power of the Command Seals were eating away at it. The Heroic Spirit released magical energy of his own to oppose it, blowing away more than half the barriers around the workshop. Several

of the mages, bombarded by more magical energy than they could handle, collapsed twitching.

Even as he was exposed to the torrent of magical energy, however, Bazdilot kept his piercing glare locked on the Heroic Spirit.

“Celebrate, affirm, and love that which they rejected. Do not hold back.”

He launched not only the power of the Command Seals, but also his own accumulated magical energy through his outflung left hand. He continued to force the reddish-brown something that stretched from his hand into Heroic Spirit, making use of even the oriental folk magic that the Clock Tower spurned as heresy.

He was cutting through the wall of magic resistance with his primitive sorcery, clearing the way for the shadowy, writhing, reddish-brown thing to worm its way in directly. The cost was now greater than it seemed conceivable Bazdilot’s cumulative magical energy could cover. The Heroic Spirit suspected some kind of trick, but he could not afford the effort to expose it.

Clutched his own body, clawing at every inch of it, the Heroic Spirit remembered the pain of the poison that had brought about his death. The suffering he felt ought to be of another kind, but his instincts dragged the torment of the poison out of his memories. His instincts were screaming that the power flowing into him now was just as dangerous.

Even as he bore the almost indescribable pain, the Heroic Spirit struggled desperately to repress the “urges” that prodded him from within and without. The next instant, however, the “mud” Bazdilot had sent into him had intertwined with the “curse” he had harbored within him as karma, and the kneeling hero let out a bellow that shook space itself.

“

_____!”

As if in sympathy with that roar, a dramatic change took place in his body.

Just as it seemed that the Heroic Spirit’s whole body had enveloped in reddish-brown mud, the muscles dropped from his thick, burly limbs. His height shrunk almost 50 centimeters, as if his very skeleton had contracted. The mud-like something that coated his body became a dye, and stained the hero’s skin reddish-brown. Then the other type of power that had intertwined with the “mud” formed a white pigment, and marked his chest with a radial design, like a scar from having his heart gouged out. As it did, the hero’s scream suddenly stopped, and he rose silently to his feet as though nothing had happened.

“How does it feel to have rid yourself of excess?” Bazdilot asked coolly, his left hand still raised. “From now on, that mud should give you power to make up for it.”

Fate/Strange Fake 3

The Heroic Spirit stared wordlessly back at him.

“The pass is already connected, but... I’ll ask first.”

Bazdilot stared at the Heroic Spirit who, although shrunken, was still a head taller than himself. His tone was indifferent.

“I ask you: are you my Servant?”

After a brief lapse of silence, the Heroic Spirit answered.

“...Why not?”

He spread the cloth that he had been wearing on his shoulders, and draped it over his head so that it concealed his face.

“In order to achieve my revenge... I will use you. When you lose your value... I will twist your head off with my own hands.”

Having donned this bizarre outfit, the Heroic Spirit delivered a disturbing pronouncement in a voice so intelligent that it was difficult to believe he had been on the verge of madness.

“Why do you hide your face?” Bazdilot asked. Naturally, he still wore no expression.

“...A precaution. So that the works of man never again enter my sight.”

“...Oh, I see. So that cloth is ‘its’ skin. If you can move freely like that, it’s no problem.”

“That is the way of it... Either way, I have no intention of exposing my face to the world. Not until I use the Holy Grail to purge my true name.”

The Heroic Spirit claimed that he would use the Holy Grail to erase a “name.”



Fate/Strange Fake 3

When Bazdilot heard that strange declaration, he grunted, then brought a hand to his chin and mused aloud:

“In that case, what should I call you? Your original nature has altered so much... Alternative... Why don’t I call you ‘Alter’?”

In response, the Heroic Spirit gave a little shake of his head, and uttered his name. He had changed completely since he had been summoned, and yet the name he spoke was his origin.

“My name is...”

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Beginning with the events at the meat processing plant, a number of Heroic Spirits descended on Snowfield that night, at roughly the same time Saber materialized in the opera house. Some accomplished the summoning as they had planned, some called up Heroic Spirits they could never have predicted, and some lost their lives before they even had a chance to see what they had summoned.

While the Masters and the Heroic Spirits they had summoned played with each other’s fates, the “Fake Holy Grail War,” whose full complement of Heroic Spirits had already been summoned, gave itself to a brief period of slumber. In order to submit themselves as medals of honor to the victors who sought them.

With the feast of Heroic Spirits that swallowed the town for a lullaby.

Interlude

“The Passion of the Nameless Soldier”

Interlude

The Passion of the Nameless Soldier

The other mages should be done summoning their Heroic Spirits before long.

Seeing the sky begin to grow light in the east, Sigma drew in a large breath, and shut the windows of the mansion. Then he set foot in the basement — in someone else’s workshop. Its barriers had already been dispelled; there was nothing to prevent Sigma’s ritual.

Can I really summon one? Sigma wondered as he descended. *What is a Heroic Spirit, anyway? What causes them to be chosen by the “Throne”?*

He was just a mercenary who could use magecraft. After the government he had served had collapsed, its destroyers had picked him up. That was the extent of their relationship. It was not as though he had any special power, so why had he been singled out? As he pondered such things, Sigma silently went on preparing the ritual.

Taking revenge on the government had never even crossed his mind.

He had received basic instruction from various mages since he was very young. It had been judged that he excelled in the use of familiars, and training in that field of magic had been beaten into him along with the use of weapons and other essential skills. He had spent his remaining time being instructed in how “capable” and “absolute” the government was. The moment that government had been easily replaced, however, he had realized that all of that was a lie.

He believed in nothing. Even his own ability seemed unreliable and uncertain after seeing his employer’s magecraft and the training of Faldeus’ unit. That was precisely why he wondered. Wondered if it was really alright for him, who had no faith, to participate in a battle for possession of something called the “Holy Grail.”

Sigma understood the object of the Holy Grail War. A thing capable of granting any wish, and a struggle for possession of the Holy Grail, which was the basis of that system. He was, nevertheless, unable to fully comprehend the very concept of that “wish-granter.” Sigma’s concept of a “wish” was extremely weak to begin with.

When his employer had asked if he had a wish for the Grail, he had been at a loss to answer. It was not as if he was without desire. If he had to say, he desired peaceful sleep and food. But did he want them enough to entrust his future to the Grail, an external device? And, even if that “Grail” did gush forth food forever, he would probably ask what was in it for the Grail. If it was a supply without a need for compensation, then it was something Sigma could not understand. Nothing could be more uncanny.

He kept his doubts in his head, however. He made no attempt to follow up on them. The emotionally deficient young man continued to dispassionately perform his work. All for a sound sleep and his daily bread. In the environment he had been raised in, those had been the hardest things to come by.

“For the alighting wind, a wall. The gates of the four directions close...”

The young man who had never believed in gods, or miracles, or even his own strength chanted in an effort to accomplish the summoning of a Heroic Spirit, a miracle equal to an act of God. He did so without emotion or desire, just mechanically circulating magical energy through his own body and the site of the ritual.

“Emerge from the ring of restraint, O guardian of the scales!”

He had not intended to put any special force into it, but as he reached the end of the incantation, magically energy was suddenly drawn from his body, and he instinctively raised his voice. Still, that was proof that magical energy had definitely flowed into the heart of the ritual.

Even as he saw light begin to well up around him, Sigma was unmoved. All he felt was the hardship of handling the currents of magical energy.

As the young man observed the swirling light, he reconfirmed his own position with extreme composure. In this “Holy Grail War,” he was no more than a pawn that his employer had used to make the numbers add up. The fact that he had not been given a catalyst was proof of that.

“You know, I was actually planning to prepare all sorts of things for you, too. Blackbeard’s treasure, that Paracelsus guy’s flask, the hero Spartacus’ manacles... But then I had a little idea. I wondered what would show up if we let the city choose the Heroic Spirit, with no catalyst at all. I wondered what could possibly be drawn by this chaos.”

She did not know what would happen. With an ecstatic smile on her face, his employer went on narrating the folly of willingly embracing such an uncertain element in a bright, clear voice.

“It’s set up so Ruler won’t come, but there’s always a chance, right? Still, even without a catalyst, it’d probably just end up being a hero with a similar nature to the summoner.

“That’s why you’re perfect; you’re nothing. You’ve got no wish for the world, and no desire to leave your mark on it... You’re basically ‘Soldier A’; nothing heroic about you. So, you can be a blank slate.

“If the Fake Grail really just chooses of its own will... what do you think will show up? Well,

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if nothing does... I wouldn't mind you just fleeing the city."

So, he was essentially a pawn to be sacrificed in order to satisfy his employer's curiosity. Even if a completely useless Heroic Spirit appeared, it would not matter.

If that does happen, what should I do?

It would at least be someone to talk to. But he had nothing in particular to discuss, not even with a hero who had once won renown.

Sigma occupied himself with such cold thoughts as he waited for the torrents of light and magical energy to settle.

He was, in fact, no more than a pawn in this Holy Grail War. He had no one's attention. He existed only as the identifier "Σ"; not even a name.

Even his employer, Francesca, was aware of him only to the extent of thinking, "I hope he brings in some fun uncertain element," and, "He's my favorite pawn, so it'd be a good deal for me if he survived."

In this Fake Holy Grail War, the youth called Sigma was merely "Soldier A"; not even a mage.

Right up until the instant his summoning ended.

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Snowfield. The great forest.

“...”

Enkidu, who possessed the highest class of the "sense presence" skill, sensed a certain "abnormality." He did not, however, think that it might be due to the summoning of a Heroic Spirit.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, and cast them apologetically down at the ground.

"I wonder... if I've angered them a little."

The only one to hear the Heroic Spirit's words was the silver wolf crouched beside him.

Without anyone to understand them, Enkidu's words were absorbed into the dense foliage.

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The wetland mansion. Basement.

“ ... ”

After the light, there was nothing before the ritual altar. Slowly surveying his surroundings, Sigma noticed a lone figure seated in a corner of the room.

It was an aging man on an old chair, a cane in his hand. He had gray hair. A large vertical scar ran from his face to below his collar. Judging by his features, he was old enough to be called elderly, but judging by the width of his strong shoulders, among other details, it was possible to take him for an active-duty marine. His most distinctive feature was the smooth, white artificial leg attached to one of his knees.

“ ... ”

Sigma warily, wordlessly scrutinized the old man. It was true that the man's presence was intimidating, but he had a feeling it was slightly different from a “hero's.” His clothes were more recent than Sigma had imagined. At the very least, he did not look like the kind of ancient person who would appear in an illustrated tale of myth, or of the middle ages.

As Sigma wracked his brains for something to say, the old man broke the silence himself.

“You're a Master in the Holy Grail War? ...Humph. You look like you've got no ambition.”

“...Who are you?”

“Me? You can call me the captain. But that won't mean anything for much longer.”

“?”

Sigma mentally scratched his head at the man's roundabout way of talking.

What does he mean, it won't mean anything? ...Anyway, formally establishing a contract should come first.

Sigma decided to question the man after he had made sure of his identity, and answer the Heroic Spirit's first question in the meanwhile.

“...I am the Master who performed the ritual that summoned you.”

The old man shook his head, his lips curling in a wicked grin.

“Hehe... It sounds like you've got the wrong idea, boy.”



“?”

It was not the old man who answered the bewildered Sigma.

“You didn’t summon us.”

The voice came from behind Sigma’s back. He spun around to face it. As he did so, he drew his pistol from its holster, and took aim.

“Who’s there?”

As he asked, he realized that the figure behind him belonged to a strangely-dressed boy. He was fitting with what looked like mechanical wings on his back and shoulders. They had become eerily skeletal, however, and bits of wax and white feathers were intertwined with them in places. If Sigma had to say, this figure was dressed more like a person from the age of ancient myths.

Sigma wondered if this boy was the Heroic Spirit, and the old man a mage who had infiltrated the mansion. When he looked at where the old man had been, however, he had already vanished from sight, leaving only an empty chair.

“I am merely — to put it in your terms — an escaped prisoner,” the boy said with a wry smile, ignoring Sigma’s confusion.

“What do you mean?”

Sigma turned in response to the voice, but the one who had uttered it was no longer anywhere to be seen. Instead, yet another man’s voice came from yet another direction.

“We are not the Heroic Spirit you summoned. We are merely projected around you as its shadows.”

In front of the door was a boy who looked to be in his early teens, clad in a white garment. A tranquil-looking snake was coiled about the staff he carried, facing toward Sigma and flicking its tongue in and out.

“A child...?”

“Oh, sorry about that. It’s an effect of using my own body in a clinical study using Medusa’s blood... Well, it’s nothing to worry about. I’m a shadow; I’ll be gone soon.”

The smiling boy’s body thinned like mist, then vanished into thin air.

What...? What’s going on?

“You sure drew the short straw, bro. You can’t get away now. Although, if you’d been a cute girl, I’d have materialized and made a go of it as a Heroic Spirit.”

Yet another voice.

“We are not Heroic Spirits; nothing of the kind. We cannot use Noble Phantasms, and we’ve not a chopstick to our names, much less a blade.”

And another.

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“Your only faults were your luck and the people you know. Thanks to them, you’ve gone and summoned yourself unavoidable hardship.”

Different voices were appearing and disappearing in the underground chamber, overlapping each other and tormenting Sigma’s mind with words he did not understand.

“Still, we have high hopes for you, you know? Hopes that you’ll make it through and become Lancer.”

He had heard that those who bore Command Seals and became Masters were able to see a Heroic Spirit’s status. These things seemed like Heroic Spirits, but he could read no information from them. Still, even though he had not even made a contract, he definitely sensed a pass of magical energy linking him to something.

Still, it doesn’t seem like it’s sucking up my magical energy.

It was a situation in which an ordinary person might very well scream, but Sigma, whose emotions had always been lacking, merely expressed a slight bewilderment.

“What do you mean, I’ll become Lancer?” He asked the appearing and disappearing crowd of self-proclaimed shadows. “Before that, what in the world are you? I’m not even certain what class of Heroic Spirit has appeared.”

Thereupon, the man who called himself “the captain” reappeared on his chair. The wrinkles on his stern brow grew even deeper as he answered.

“I see. It’s not quite the right way to put it, but our role is to be always looking down from a height, so I suppose you should call us...

“Watcher.”

Chapter 7

“The Canon of the Demigods”

Chapter 7: Day 1, Afternoon (1)

The Canon of the Demigods

In a dream.

“Mr. Sun’s all nice and warm! Don’t you think so, Mr. Black?”

The Snowfield of Tsubaki’s dream world.

Kuruoka Tsubaki sounded innocent as she sat on the lawn of a garden where animals gambled.

The fantastic entity called “Mr. Black” — Pale Rider — however, was huddled under the shadow of the trees.

“Oh? Do you not like Mr. Sun, Mr. Black?”

As if in answer to Tsubaki’s question, Rider gave a sudden shiver.

“Just a little,” she had a feeling the black mass was saying, based on its behavior. It could just be her imagination, but Tsubaki called out to Rider anyway.

“If you don’t feel good, why not go inside?”

Rider, alias “Mr. Black,” had not spoken to Tsubaki since their first meeting. Since taking numerous animals into her dream, however, it had gradually begun to express itself through its behavior, although only at the level that it was possible to tell if it was in a good or bad mood, like an animal.

As Tsubaki headed inside, she suddenly looked around at the silent residential district, and murmured:

“I wonder if everyone left because they don’t like this city...”

Tsubaki’s expression clouded over. “Mr. Black,” now roughly her same size, leaned in close to her and rubbed her head, almost as if to ask, “Is anything the matter?” Tsubaki smiled at it, and shook her head.

“Thank you. I’m fine, Mr. Black.”

Then, looking around at the countless animals frolicking in the garden, she continued:

“I mean, now there are so many animals here. Not like before...”

“Now that it’s like this, mom, and dad, and everybody else will stay in this city, won’t they?”

Rider heard those words, and judged that they constituted her “wish.” Rider was currently an exceedingly incomplete wish-granter that took orders from its Master, Tsubaki.

Rider began to wriggle, ready to use its power to make the situation she wished for reality. At present, however, Rider was not capable of complex inferences.

And...

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The real world. The outskirts of Snowfield.

The long road ran through the wilderness, and several cars ran along the road. Several mages were riding in one of them. They were not very well known, even in the Clock Tower. They were, however, one of the parties that had caught wind of the rumors, and visited Snowfield with an eye to making a name for themselves.

“We just passed the city limits.”

The words of the young mage who was driving elicited groans from the middle-aged mage in the back seat.

“Uly! Wet uph ough of ‘ish shiphy, wickwy!”

They could not tell what he was saying, but they could tell that he was terrified.

He had attempted to negotiate with a Heroic Spirit — apparently Assassin — and ended up with a dagger through his tongue. As healing magecraft was not his strong suit, he went on wailing at the driver, his apprentice, with his tongue wrapped in amulets.

“I understand, master. We gave up the moment we saw that crater in the desert, so we’re with you in wanting to run.”

“The car in front of us is probably full of mages too. There’s a familiar circling over it, and...”

Then, the driver noticed a change. Starting at about the point they had left the city limits, there were a number of cars parked on either side of the road. The car that had been running a ways ahead of them hurriedly pulled over and stopped as well.

The driver was wondering what could have prompted that, out here in the middle of nowhere, when he saw the familiar that had been flying above the car in front of them plummet to earth. At the same time, he experienced a powerful nausea, and it became difficult for him to continue driving.

“...!?”

He hurriedly pulled the car over into the shoulder, and looked into the rear view mirror,

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prepared to excuse himself.

“Ex-excuse me, I suddenly felt... Master!?”

The scene reflected in the rear view mirror was abnormal. The middle-aged mage, his teacher, had collapsed, his body limp and his face pale.

“This is bad. We have to...”

Suppressing his own nausea, the driver turned to the senior apprentice in the passenger seat, and gave another shudder. The senior apprentice’s face was also pale, and he was twitching. What looked like blue bruises were emerging on the backs of his hands and neck.

“Wha... Ah... Aaaahh!”

Then, the driver noticed. Similar bruises were rising on his own arms, worming their way into his body. A scream echoed in the car. Silence followed.

Several minutes later, the car slowly started moving. The other cars stopped around it likewise began to move as soon as their engines started. Every one of them making a U-turn, and heading back into Snowfield.

Inside the car making its way into town, the blank-eyed driver announced:

“I’m so looking forward to going back to Snowfield!”

“Yes, it’s such a nice city. We’ve got to get good seats to watch the Grail War!” The senior apprentice in the passenger seat answered, his eyes equally vacant.

The bruises that had formed on their bodies had largely faded, and their complexions were recovering. Their minds, however, had become something else entirely.

“Ull, ully, ack oo a shiphy.”

Listening to their master’s cheerful wails, they drove the car across the wasteland. To the city of Snowfield, where the chaos of battle raged on.

On this day, at this moment, the city of Snowfield became a lenient prison. A prison that let no one leave, and refused no one entry. It looked almost as if the city had a will of its own, and was gobbling people up.

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North Snowfield. The large ravine.

What's happening...? Who are those Heroic Spirits...?

Tine Chelk poked her face out from the back of Vimana, a flying Noble Phantasm Gilgamesh had drawn from his treasury. The scene that had taken place was burned into her eyes.

Gilgamesh had squared off with the mystery Archer. A mysterious female Servant had interrupted their battle. Gilgamesh had looked obviously displeased at the interruption, but events had moved on before the intruder had a chance to respond.

That instant, the mysterious Archer, who one blow from the female Heroic Spirit had buried under a mountain of rubble, had sent that rubble flying like a volcanic eruption.

Numerous giant boulders had were flung so high into the air that Tine had to crane her neck to see them. Then several of the stones suddenly shattered, and arrows shrouded in vast quantities of magical energy appeared from among the fragments. The mysterious Archer had flown up with the rubble, and loosed countless arrows from behind the soaring rocks.

The rain of arrows, each one accompanied by its own tornado, sped down at Gilgamesh and the female Heroic Spirit, pulling the shards of the shattered boulders into the swirling vacuums as they came.

An instant later, Gilgamesh launched weapons from his Gate of Babylon, while the female Heroic Spirit nocked multiple arrows to the bow that appeared in her hands, and fired them all at the same time. The weapons and arrows, fired at speeds too fast for Tine's eyes to follow, were warding off the violent whirlwinds one after another.

It's only to be expected of His Majesty... but just who is that Heroic Spirit...?

Based on the fact that she had appeared on horseback, she was most likely Rider. Based on her skill with a bow, however, she could just as easily be Archer. But that would mean that three different Archers had manifested in the city.

Or can she use a bow with that much force, despite not being an archer...?

Impossible, Tine thought. That would be like an archer competing with the other classes in swordsmanship.

The King of Heroes had swords like Ea and Merodach despite being Archer, but, leaving out their fearsome power, he would never attempt to match the Saber class head-on in pure swordsmanship. That, at least, was what Tine thought then.

The scene playing out before her eyes, however, defied her common sense.

“...”

The female Heroic Spirit held out her right hand beside herself, and a horse appeared there.

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She then lightly mounted it, and vigorously road it off up the ravine.

The cloth wrapped around her arm was still overflowing with concentrated divinity. She circulated the potent magical energy into the horse through its bridle. Horse and rider, moving as a single organism, rapidly threaded their way through the rain of gales. Massive chunks of rubble had begun to fall back to earth. She began to gallop lightly over them, eventually riding across even the boulders still in mid air.

Witnessing the female Heroic Spirit traveling backwards up the waterfall of rubble, Tine was sure.

She can only be Rider!

That would mean that a hero who naturally possessed the qualities of an archer had taken the form of Rider in this War. It might be reasonable to suppose that the force of her bow had been enhanced by divine aura flowing from the cloth wrapped around her arm.

Then that cloth is a Noble Phantasm... one that strengthens its user's abilities...

As she watched, the female Heroic Spirit climbed high into the sky, and at last arrived at the peak of the falling rubble. Then, pinpointing the figure of the mystery Archer below her, she drew her bow taut atop her steed.

The mystery Archer noticed her presence, and turned to look at her through the cloth that covered his head.

“...”

The horsewoman was facing him, the sun at her back, and drawing her bow coated in concentrated divinity.

“...I see.”

“Archerrr!”

Baring her powerful animosity, the woman put her whole being into the shout.

“...So it’s you, queen of treachery,” the archer muttered.

He readied his own bow, not even bothering to evade, and made concentrated divinity well up from the cloth around his own arm. Then he intercepted the five arrows the horsewoman had fired with as many arrows of his own. The arrowheads collided without so much as an inch of deviation. The magical energy they had been imbued with clashed, rebounded, and assailed the surroundings as a great wind.

While blocking the wind, and the pebbles it carried, with her own magecraft, Tine watched for the archer’s next movement.

But it was the horsewoman who moved first. She was refining a divine aura, even more potent than before, behind the archer’s back. She had leapt off her steed as she fired, and, using it as a decoy, had gotten behind her enemy.

“...Impudent,” the archer muttered, and started to turn. Before he had the chance, however, an arrow struck his back, just where his heart was, at the speed of sound.

And yet, for some reason, no sooner had the arrowhead struck the man’s body — struck the cloth draped over his head — than it splintered, scattering to the winds without eating into his flesh.

“I knew it...” The rider he had called “queen” groaned at the sight. More than surprise, the groan seemed to imply the confirmation of her conjecture.

“...I see,” Gilgamesh muttered. He had temporarily re-boarded Vimana, and been surveying events from the ground.

“Has Your Majesty learned something?” Tine timidly inquired.

“How that mere bowman was able to defend against all my Noble Phantasms,” the King of Heroes replied amusedly, “as well as why he failed to defend against a blow of that mere horsewoman’s fist.”

“There is a reason, then...?”

“A trifle. His armor is special, that’s all.”

“His... armor?” Tine asked, turning to look at the archer, who had returned to earth.

The archer was wearing almost nothing that could be called armor. The only things covering his upper body were the strange, patterned cloth draped over his head, and other patterned cloth wrapped around his arm.

“It is most likely the hide of some species of demonic or divine beast. It can have been no small task to work it into that form, but it was probably originally something like an Ugallu.”

Gilgamesh gave the name of a Babylonian monster as an example, but that was not enough to satisfy Tine.

“You mean that this hide repelled all of Your Majesty’s tremendous blows?” She pressed.

“Numbers do not enter into it. Divine or demonic beasts sometimes reject human civilization itself in that way. A moment ago, I hit him with anything and everything — not only my first-class armaments, but even the Noble Phantasms of lower orders that I would ordinarily not even bother firing. I do not believe he repelled them all with skill alone. If he did so with his body, or some form of magical energy, however, it would fail to explain the fact that the hide is completely unharmed.”

At that point, the King of Heroes narrowed his eyes, and tightened his grip on Merodach, the sword of selection.

“Occasionally a creature of that sort appears — a singularity that rejects human civilization itself. At the very least, no tool created by humans will pierce that skin.”

The set of Gilgamesh’s lips softened slightly.

“What is it, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, just that if he skinned the beast himself, I have high hopes for him.”

Seeing the wry smile on the King of Heroes’ face, Tine realized what those words meant. This Heroic Spirit — the epitome of strength — hoped that the archer standing before him possessed strength to rival his own. Surely he would have condemned an ordinary Heroic Spirit who relied on the power of a Noble Phantasm to swat aside his treasures as irreverent.

Tine was reconfirmed in the belief that the bowman under her gaze was a fearsome enemy. He was, after all, sufficient to give this great and proud king “high hopes.”

“Even without his armor, sweeping my Noble Phantasms aside with his bow was a feat of consummate skill. It was worthy of praise, although I would never be so common.”

“But what are those Noble Phantasms wrapped around both of their arms...?”

“Most likely some sort of legacy a god forced on humans. Observe; they are the same item, but each of them uses it in an entirely different manner.”



“?”

Tine did as the King of Heroes bid her, casting a spell for sensing magical energy on her eyes, and staring closely at the battle.

There was indeed a difference. The horsewoman was circulating the high-density magical energy — worth of the name divinity — throughout her body. The bowman, however, only applied it to his weapons; he never accepted the power into himself.

“Why...? If he channeled that divine aura into a body with the qualities his has, he could probably overwhelm his opponent.”

The King of Heroes grunted, and pondered Tine’s words. Then a shade of joy entered his expression, as if he had discovered a curious toy.

“I merely find the gods I know disagreeable... but it seems that fellow despises the gods he believed in so deeply that he wants to kill them.”

“He hates... his gods?”

“Comical, is it not? I’m sure it was those same gods who created that sturdy body of his. Imagine, maintaining such force of will while despising his very existence. The fool shows promise.”

Gilgamesh’s words had not reached the horsewoman, but as she loosed arrow after arrow at the archer, she shouted:

“Why? Why do you not take my father’s power — the power of the war belt — into yourself? Are you looking down on me!? Mocking me!?”

“The power of a god is not for housing in one’s own body,” the bowman answered solemnly, parrying her shots, each of which was imbued with the power to destroy armies, with the bow in his hand.

“...What?”

When she heard that, the horsewoman finally noticed the thing flowing deep into her opponent’s body. A power like scorched poison, utterly unlike that of a god, filled the bowman. He was using that power to control the energy that radiated from the “war belt” by force, as if it was his familiar.

Readying his bow, imbued with the mingled powers of a god and something else, the archer uttered words like a curse, imbued with mingled rage and scorn, from behind his cloth.

“It should be forced to submit, trampled underfoot... and ruled by the might of man.”

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The same time. The police station.

“Report for you, sir. Confirming multiple responses thought to be Heroic Spirits in the northern ravine. One of them is thought to be Archer — Gilgamesh.”

Having received the secret report, the chief of police heaved a large sigh. Then he turned his gavel on the girl mastermind sitting on his sofa and eating a cake she had produced seemingly from nowhere.

“...You’re going to explain this, Francesca.”

“Explain what? I’m pretty sure I explained the summoning of the true Heroic Spirits before we even started.”

“What I want to know is who summoned what.”

Francesca looked away from the chief, who glared quietly at her, a finger on her chin.

“What? You want to know that, in a Holy Grail War? Nope. I know that Heroic Spirit’s identity, and its Master’s information, so I could tell you, but, on the other hand, it doesn’t seem like Faldeus or his bosses trust you that much. Whatever shall I do?”

“Don’t play dumb. Between this and the incident last night at the opera house, it’s doubtful whether the participating mages have any idea of secrecy. Openly attacking a casino hotel in the middle of the day gets the townspeople involved. The Dead Apostle hasn’t shown himself yet, but I’ve gotten reports of people injured by broken glass!”

The chief’s tone became slightly rougher as he spoke. Francesca turned to him with a gloomy smile.

“Oh? I thought we were prepared to involve civilians the moment we decided on this city as the stage for the Grail War.”

“Not in such a visible form. We summoned that Caster in order to win reliably while still keeping damage to a minimum. If any Master is willing to involve the people of this city for no real reason, I believe they should be eliminated immediately.”

“You really are uptight. Well, it’s not like I’m out to slaughter the townspeople either, so I’ll give you a hint,” Francesca giggled. “You know God? I don’t mean the one the kids at the Holy Church worship; I mean gods from a different mythology.”

“...?”

“You see, back when this planet was still overflowing with magical energy — what they call the age of the gods — all sorts of ‘concepts’ and ‘foreign bodies’ had relations with humans. They had intelligence, but in the end they were different creatures.”

Francesca stared into the distance as she spoke, narrowing her eyes, as if at a fond memory.

“When that happened, as you might expect, there were some mix-ups. Lots of comedies and

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tragedies came out of them. Well, that's also true when it's just between humans, but... Anyway, when your partner's basically a mass of energy, the mix-ups and misunderstandings are on a whole different level! So, the laughter and the sadness both get scaled up, you see?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"Of course, hate boils up to match, too."

Then, turning her attention to the swirls of magical energy she could sense from the direction of the ravine, she ecstatically recalled what she had seen the previous evening.

"It's true that his class is Archer, but his essence has totally changed. I guess it'd make sense to say he's about half Avenger now."

"...'Avenger'?"

The chief had heard from Faldeus that the Einzberns had summoned a Heroic Spirit of that special class in the third Holy Grail War. Apparently it had not been very strong, for a Heroic Spirit, and had been swiftly eliminated. He remembered, however, that Faldeus — who had read the data an actual participant had left in his own puppet — had told him, with a grave expression:

"I have no definite proof... but if that Heroic Spirit had won through, the world itself might have ended. Anyway, it was a weird one."

If an entity with the same nature as that Heroic Spirit had appeared, surely that made it unbelievably dangerous?

The chief scowled. Francesca shrugged her shoulders, and told him about the bowman — Avenger. Told him cheerfully, delightedly, as if she cherished the very vengeful grudge of that Heroic Spirit.

"Although, that Heroic Spirit's grudge isn't against humanity... it's against the old, old gods who've already gone and disappeared or rotted away or hidden themselves somewhere these days."

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The large ravine.

The bowman and horsewoman with the same Noble Phantasm continued their battle, mixing long and close range attacks. The horsewoman had produced a spear and bow from the magical energy with a pronounced tint of divinity that was native to her frame. She made skillful use of both in conjunction with her trusty steed as she kept up her assault on the bowman.

Could that horse be one of her Noble Phantasms? Tine wondered as she watch the combat.

It displayed movements like those of a phastasmal beast, and inconceivable in an ordinary horse, as the horsewoman attempted to drive the bowman further into a corner. But then, as if it had sensed something, the horse stopped, and reared up on its hind legs. As it did so, countless weapons embedded themselves in the ground between her and the bowman.

“I thought I told you not to interfere!”

The horsewoman glared at the man who had fired them.

“Fool,” that man — the King of Heroes — spat back. “I have to no ear to lend a woman so ill-mannered as to not dismount in the presence of a king.”

He stood in Vimana’s prow, gazing calmly down. The space behind him glittered with the points of the innumerable Noble Phantasms that slept in his treasury.

The horsewoman temporarily distanced herself from the two archers, and stared suspiciously at the man aboard Vimana.

“A king? You?”

“Ignorant as well as impudent. You may be called a queen, but I suppose you are one of thieves who squabbled over bits of my garden in my absence. Sickening.”

There was no sarcasm; his frigid words were charged with unmistakable contempt.

“You are not worthy of existing in the same place as the true king — myself. Be gone.”

With the air of a man sweeping a pebble from the roadside with his foot, the King of Heroes launched a swarm of Noble Phantasms from his Gate of Babylon.

“...!”

Instinct must have warned the horsewoman that taking a direct hit from them would be unwise. Skillfully handling her steed, she weaved her way through the rain of Noble Phantasms.

Then the cloth-covered bowman loosed a pointed shaft, his aim fixed on the horse.

“!”

The horse dodged the arrow by a hair’s breadth, but lost its balance. The second wave from the Gate of Babylon was bearing down on horse and rider. Instantly, even more powerful magical energy welled up from the horsewoman. She rolled together the magical energy within herself, thick with divinity, and the pure magical energy welling from the cloth — which could be called divinity itself — and channeled it into the spear in her hand. The horsewoman hurled her spear at the King of Heroes, endeavoring to repel the countless Noble Phantasms bearing down on her with brute force.

The spear, cloaked in divine aura, drove through the second shower of Noble Phantasms, hurtling toward Gilgamesh’s heart. The King of Heroes, however, did not move a step. He deployed a number of shield Noble Phantasms from his Gate of Babylon. The spear closing in on

him drove through several of them before coming to a halt.

"It's been bugging me for a little while now — what's with that ridiculous number of Noble Phantasms?"

The horsewoman sounded exasperated. Gilgamesh ignored her, and pronounced with an air of indifference:

"Coming against me with the power of a god, of all things... Your insolence knows no bounds, woman."

Then, surveying the horsewoman, he grinned. It seemed his interest had been slightly piqued.

"You may not have come through unscathed, but I see you did manage to take several high-ranking Noble Phantasms."

The horsewoman was losing a not inconsiderable quantity of blood from wounds on her shoulders and sides. Several of the Noble Phantasm she had not been able to completely parry must have grazed her. Even so, she comported herself as a warrior astride her mount.

Seeing that, the King of Heroes gave a nod, and considered.

"It appears the blood of a god I do not know runs thick in your veins. I had thought my pleasure spoiled, but with both of you as my opponents, this should at least serve as a warm-up for fulfilling my agreement with my friend."

The King of Heroes still made a show of complacency, but there was no carelessness or conceit in his eyes.

"You are touchstones. You may not fall without my consent."

To the King of Heroes, a serious warm-up meant testing everything he had prepared against the battle with his friend, including wiles he would never normally employ.

"...If you insist on continuing to get in my way, I'll eliminate you first, Golden King."

At that point, the King of Heroes gave a scornful laugh.

"In your way, am I? Are you certain you did not mean your salvation, girl who calls herself queen?"

"What...?"

Gilgamesh glanced at the bowman standing imposingly before a heap of rubble as he answered the dubious rider.

"If you cannot even realize when you are being toyed with, how do you intend to hunt that man?"

"...You say I'm being toyed with?"

"As Heroic Spirits, you and he belong to different orders. You cannot be so cheap as to fail to realize that."

Even Tine, observing the Heroic Spirits from the shadow of Vimana, was able to grasp the King of Heroes' words.

Masters in the Holy Grail War were granted the simple clairvoyant ability to know their opponents' general strengths and weaknesses, divided into status, strength, agility, and so on. The way this information appeared to each Master varied depending on their sensibilities. Tine visualized it as the difference in the speeds of the currents of six rivers flowing from a mountain.

As far as she could see, all the rivers ran swiftly for the King of Heroes and the cloth-shrouded bowman. Compared to them, the horsewoman's flowed at a gentle pace. The river governing luck, in particular, stood out as slow in its course. Even in a simple comparison of basic abilities, she seemed to be at a slight disadvantage. It appeared that she was raising her natural power several ranks by housing the divine aura of her Noble Phantasm in her own body. Against an opponent who possessed the same Noble Phantasm, however, it would not be sufficient to give her an advantage. There might possibly be a difference between housing the power of a god in one's own body and using it as a tool, but Tine was unable to conjecture what effect that difference might have.

While Tine pondered, the horsewoman's expression stiffened, and she shot a piercing glare at the bowman.

"I know he outclasses me..."

For just an instant, the tone of her voice matched her youthful appearance. The next, she launched into a bold declaration, bearing her unadulterated animosity.

"After all, I was killed by this man!"

"What?"

For a moment, Tine froze, not comprehending the rider's behavior. She knew what the words meant, but she could not understand the point of shouting something that would give others a hint to the horsewoman's true name. She was acquainted with the bowman, and against the King of Heroes, concealing her true name likely meant little. Still, it was impossible to know where a familiar might be watching. Could she afford to reveal a clue to her true name under those conditions?

Perhaps the horsewoman was more impulsive than Tine had imagined. The thought turned Tine's mind to the true names of the enemy Heroic Spirits.

A woman called a queen, skilled in horse-riding, who uses a bow and spear.

A hero who killed her.

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A cloth Noble Phantasm they both possess.

An animal pelt that denies humanity.

Inside Tine, who had studied a wide range of myths and epics in preparation for the Grail War, a number of puzzle pieces fell into place, and formed the figures of two heroes.

She did not, however, accept that answer easily. The horsewoman was one thing, but the impression she got from the bowman was just too far removed from the hero she had pictured.

Then, as if to prove it, the horsewoman shouted:

“But my end is of no importance!”

She stared at the bowman, and then at Tine.

!?

Tine stiffened under her unexpected gaze. The horsewoman, however, made no move to attack her, and returned her glare to the bowman.

“Answer me! Why did you aim for that child?”

The archer’s response, in contrast, was dispassionate.

“It is only natural to target a Master who carelessly shows herself alongside her Servant. Though a child, she is a mage who has joined battle with the resolve to crush her enemies. I have no cause to make allowances for her. Of all people, you, queen, whose origin is war itself, ask me this?”

“Quiet! Shut your mouth and wipe it off your face! I told you to answer, but I don’t want to hear commonplace arguments that sound like they come from the mouth of a stranger!” The horsewoman bellowed irrationally. Re-materializing her spear, she pointed it at the bowman, and continued her questioning.

“You were the one who bent every accepted rule of the battlefield into whatever shape you desired with your strength and cunning! That’s why I believed that you... that you at least were a man who would never do such a thing!”

Her attention was now completely focused on the bowman. From Tine’s perspective, it seemed like the perfect opening. However...

“My king...”

“Leave them be. Watching two clowns slander each other is a form of entertainment.”

Despite what the King of Heroes said, there was no disorder or inattention in the magical energy that cloaked him. Tine could, however, sense something like a curiosity to know more of his opponent’s natures. The bowman, at least, must have considerable ability, to arouse the interest of her haughty king. It was the horsewoman, however, who was on Tine’s mind.

That rider is angry that the archer targeted me...? More than she is about being killed herself? ...Why?

Tine had offered up her life for the sake of her people. From the time she had determined to summon the King of Heroes and eliminate the mages, she had been prepared to have the tables turned on her and be killed instead. From her perspective, the bowman's argument was sound.

Does she not even view me as an enemy...?

Indifferent to the girl's confusion, the horsewoman shouted again from atop her horse.

"I have heard that you were merciless in battle; that you even pillaged the streets of enemy towns. I'm sure you used cowardly sneak attacks, too, if it served your goals. But that would not shake the fame of a hero if it was done for the sake of his ambition."

The mounted girl raised her voice still higher, her manner more mature than her appearance.

"But, whatever the circumstances — even if you faced a cursed child who would bring disaster to the world — I was sure you never gleefully aimed your bow at a child! You would be the last person to forgive that!"

"..."

"Where did you abandon the name that was the glory of the gods, that echoed in awed and reverent song throughout our native land, to the ends of the fertile plain of the Thermodon:—"

Abandoning herself to momentum and rage, the horsewoman made to shout her enemy's name, not caring that doing so would reveal her own, when...

"Silence."

One word from the bowman froze the air around them.

At the same time, a shadow — the same reddish-brown color that stained the man's body — welled up, and wriggled like a living thing. It was hate; it was fear; it was scorn; it was regret; it was envy; it was pity; it was rage; it was resignation; it was malice; it was mortification; it was despair; and therefore it was empty.

From the depths of that shadow, like a range of emotions distilled to its absolute limit, came a voice that seemed to place a curse on all who heard it.

Even the bold horsewoman looked daunted for a moment, and Tine thought her own heart might stop. Only the King of Heroes remained calm. His lips actually curled in a faint smile, like a critic viewing comedy.

"The hero that name belonged to no longer exists," the bowman continued, ignoring all three reactions. "No, 'he' is no longer even a hero. He was a fool who ingratiated himself to ple-

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asure-besotted tyrants, and paid for it by burning off the robe of earth — his human soul — in flames and thunderbolts. On his deathbed he broke his oath, and chose pleasure over pain!”

“Who are you? What do you want...?” The queen asked, cold sweat running down her cheeks. She was convinced that the man was not the great hero she knew.

“I am but a human being. I reject the gods of Olympus — your father Ares included — and I will trample and defile them. I am simply an avenger, and I live for nothing else.

“Yes, my flesh and blood, my very soul, is the shadow of a fool who fell so low that he became a god.”

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The police station.

Francesca twisted with excitement, remembering the “Heroic Spirit” Bazdilot had summoned, which she had viewed through her crystal ball early that morning with his permission.

“Aah! My guts are about to boil just thinking about it! That sense of living only to defile and blaspheme the gods! I love it! It reminds me of my best friend, you know? I bet they’d get along great if I brought them together. But then, their grudges are against totally different gods.”

The chief began to leave the room, ignoring Francesca, who was rambling incomprehensibly in a world of her own.

“Oh? Where are you off to?”

“To deal with the situation, obviously.”

“Are you crazy? It looks like you had a good match with that Assassin girl yesterday, but I’m pretty sure there’s nothing you can do about the kids up at the ravine.” Francesca closed her legs, and addressed the chief with a serious look. “If you’re not careful, King Goldy might kill you the minute you butt in.”

The chief was well aware that what she said was correct. But as a mage who had to put the secrecy of magic first, and as a police chief who had to ensure the safety of his city, he could not sit quietly by.

“I can’t just leave them to it. At this rate, a stray shot could easily demolish a building. I’ll sound out Faldeus for help as well, although I doubt it will do any good. Even if he can’t directly intervene in the fighting, it’s better to tackle the cover-up sooner than later.”

“Oh, you don’t have to get so worked up. I’ve already taken measures.”

“What...?”

Francesca grinned obscenely at the dubious chief, and pronounced a sentence that would cause him even more headaches:

“You see, the Servant I summoned is heading there to interrupt them as we speak!”

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“I see...”

The horsewoman heard the bowman’s voice, filled with deep resentment and determination, and the fury vanished from within her.

“Then you are no longer him.”

She narrowed her eyes, steadied her breathing, and gently stroked her horse’s neck. In an instant, the divine aura enveloping her intertwined with her own magical energy, rapidly increasing its purity.

“...!? This is...”

Sensing the magical energy through the leylines of the land, Tine gasped in spite of herself.

The Holy Grail War system — at least if it was identical to the system in Fuyuki, which Tine had investigated beforehand — should be incapable of summoning a Divine Spirit. The extent to which a Heroic Spirit, once summoned, could wield divine power, however, was something Tine did not know.

If the horsewoman was who Tine thought she was, then she must be a demigod, with a god for a father. She lacked the power of a full Divine Spirit, but what would happen if that cloth-shaped Noble Phantasms supplied the difference?

Tine’s face paled, but she neither feared nor doubted. At her side stood a king who she paid greater reverence than any god.

“In that case, I will not try to put you back on the right path. I will eliminate you as an enemy, along with the golden king.”

When he heard those words, a fiendish smile stole over the King of Heroes’ features.

“I see you know how to bark, girl!”

His grin was a picture of arrogance. There was none of his earlier scorn and contempt in it.

The King of Heroes’ had been the first to notice: The presence of the rider, who had been running wild, allowing her emotions to get the better of her, had instantly switched over to that of a warrior befitting the divine aura that cloaked her.

And at the present moment, the eyes of the King of Heroes, which were less proud, had seen

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through to a part of his opponent's true nature — what she was about to attempt to become. But because the king was a king, he stuck to his pride.

"You have some nerve to lump me, a king, in with a mere avenger! I shall grace your barbarity with a laugh, along with your farce!"

It was true that, in this Holy Grail War, the King of Heroes was neither conceited nor careless. So long as he was a king, however, his arrogant disposition would always remain his natural pose.

The bowman, meanwhile, twisted his lips in a brutal grin beneath his monster hide.

"A good omen. I may not believe in the forgotten tyrants, but perhaps the stars do move our fates."

As he spoke, ominous magical energy coiled around the arrow nocked to his bow. The aura it gave off was such that an amateur mage, or even an ordinary human, would have noticed it.

"It is only the outset of war, and already I have the opportunity to fell a pair of demigods."

The quality of the arrow was not all that had changed. He had dropped his earlier daunting pose for a more natural posture. The bow and arrow hung loosely at his side. At first glance, it almost looked like he had abandoned his combat stance entirely.

In spite of his posture, however, the eerie pressure he radiated only continued to increase. The average fighter would be assailed by a terror that was almost despair the instant they set eyes on him. His opponents, however, were a queen clad in divine power, and the original hero king wrapped in golden radiance.

Faced with two rulers who showed not the slightest fear, the bowman forced muddy, black energy to ooze from every inch of his frame, and...

"Alright, that's enough of that."

Just as all three Heroic Spirits seemed about to make their moves, the guileless voice of a boy echoed through the snow-covered forest that extended as far as the eye could see.

"...What?"

Tine's bewildered exclamation came a moment after the boy's interruption.

"...!?"

"!"

"..."

The queen widened her eyes in shock, the bowman narrowed his eyes slightly, and the King

of Heroes ran a suspicious eye over the surrounding scenery.

They should have been standing in a large ravine with only sparse vegetation. And yet, before the boy's words even had time to register, trees completely filled their view. They were standing in the midst of a forest dominated by the white of the snow that lay thick on conifers, overwhelming the hues of their needles and bark.

Powdered snow fell on Tine's bare, slender arms, and she felt the chill through her skin.

Forced teleportation?

As she hurriedly gathered a layer of air around herself for protection, Tine attempted to conjecture what had happened to them.

But such advanced magecraft — practically Magic — just isn't...!

Currently, there was nowhere near Snowfield where it would be possible to see scenery like this. There was the great forest to the west, but the variety of trees was different, and, despite the name "Snowfield," actual snowfall was rare in the region.

It was also possible that they had been drawn into another world — a unique space called a "Reality Marble" — by a Servant. Tine had heard that there were Heroic Spirits that employed such techniques.

And yet, Tine's Servant, the King of Heroes, showed no particular sign of alarm.

"Do not lose your head," he told her. "It is merely an illusion."

"An illusion...?"

Illusion was a diverse type of general-purpose magecraft. It could be used for concealing a specified place, confusing senses of direction in a specified area, or even cast on oneself to aid in training or reinforce suggestion. Most ordinary illusions, however, were ineffective against targets possessing Magic Circuits above a certain level, or a Magic Crest. As a result, very few mages attempted to master it as anything more than convenient, general-use magecraft. In fact, Tine had experienced having an illusion cast on her in the past, but she was linked to the leylines of the land, and had strengthened her senses through them, so it had had no effect on her.

In the present circumstance, however, she could feel the cold even through the leylines.

...Going by magical energy links, we're definitely still in a canyon in the land of my ancestors... This really is an illusion, then... But could there really be an illusion powerful enough to fool not just human senses... but the land itself as well!?

How many human mages could have reached that level? With a special medium, such as powerful Mystic Eyes, it would be a different story, but in ordinary circumstances an illusion of that level would be considered beyond the realm of human mages.

...A new Servant!

She could not tell if this was the work of a Noble Phantasm, or of raw magecraft. At the very

least, however, it was highly probable that the owner of that boy's voice was a new Servant.

"This won't do. You all need to cool your heads. What are you thinking, playing your trump cards on the very first day? Of course, rumor has it that certain people played their trump cards in the desert before the show even started! Ha ha!"

The boy's voice carried through the entire snowy forest, but it was impossible to pin down where it had come from. It was almost as if each individual snowflake was acting as a speaker for it.

Gilgamesh acted as if he had not heard the voice, and spoke with a tone of mild displeasure:

"To think that there was another mannerless ruffian waiting to spoil my entertainment at the last moment. I do not know what you are after, but did you imagine you could deceive my eyes with this paltry illusion?"

"Oh my, that's the Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes, for you! The whole human race's landlord, who enjoyed equal fame as an enlightened monarch and a despot! Looks like I can't pull the wool over Your great, haughty, wise and pedantic Majesty's penetrating eyes! Whatever shall I do?"

An address that went beyond over-embellishment into obvious mockery sounded through the illusory forest in a boyish voice. Then, an instant later... A different, androgynous voice rang out from behind Gilgamesh and Tine.

"Then how about your ears, Gil?"

Tine turned, and saw a Heroic Spirit. A Heroic Spirit with a face and build that could be taken for either male or female, and to which an indefinable trace of youth clung. A smooth, lean body that reminded Tine of a perfected beast. Features so graceful and beautiful that it did not seem to matter if they were male or female.

This Servant is...

Tine was immediately able to recognize what the entity that had appeared suddenly behind her was. She had only viewed the events from a distance, through a familiar, but this was certainly the Heroic Spirit Gilgamesh had confronted immediately after manifesting; the one he had made the crater in the desert with.

Based on their timing and words, however, Tine also immediately recognized that this must be an illusory fake.

In that case, how would the King of Heroes react? Before Tine could finish turning to look

at him, Merodach flashed in his hand and dispersed the illusory Heroic Spirit.

“Who gave you permission to mimic my friend’s form and voice?”

A searing tremor crossed the pass between them to shake Tine’s Magic Circuits. She was able to imagine that the King of Heroes was likely seething with cold rage, rather than abandoning himself to an outburst of emotion.

“And for attempting to use them to deceive me, even ten thousand deaths would be too kind. I will make you regret your rash act using every device humankind has ever created purely to inflict pain.”

Once more, the boy’s voice rang out through the snowy forest:

“Don’t be mad, Your Majesty. It was just a mischievous fool’s joke.”

Calling itself a “fool,” it begged the king’s pardon in name only.

At that, however, Gilgamesh flashed a look of anger more intense than ever before. His angry roar echoed in the forest, as if to rebuke the place itself:

“Simpleton! A fool is one who brings others merriment by simply being!”

It seemed he had strong personal views on fools. His bearing was even haughtier than usual, and his words seethed with undisguised rage.

“And yet you call yourself a fool, and attempt to make a boorish excuse of your being one! You are no longer even third-rate; you cannot even call yourself a fool! You are no more than an imbecile drunk on his own eccentricities!”

Gilgamesh’s unprecedented display of anger made Tine break out in a cold sweat. Even the things that enraged him differed from the ordinary mass of humanity, so she, as his retainer, was unclear what she should be wary of in future. For the time being, she made a mental note that any discussion of “fools” was taboo in the king’s presence.

But then, she did not expect to have any opportunity to broach the subject herself.

At that point, a crushing noise sounded from a distance away, and tress that were supposed to be products of illusion made very real splintering sounds as they were mowed down.

The illusion was apparently visible to the queen as well. She looked up at the sky, her face a mask of rage, and shouted:

“Don’t mock me! Where are you? Show yourself, dealer in deceptions!”

She had appeared to compose herself earlier, but her fury had once again overtaken her.

Tine was wondering what the queen had been shown, when confusion suddenly entered her expression.

“What...?” The horsewoman abruptly froze, and shouted at the empty air. “You’re telling me to withdraw, Master? But...!”

“!”

Hearing her voice, Tine immediately understood. The horsewoman’s Master must have just telepathically instructed her to retreat.

The bowman, meanwhile, continued to stand, calm-faced, amid the snow, as if he alone were not being forced to see any illusion.

The horsewoman faced the bowman, shot him a sad, almost pitying, look, then hung her head.

“...Understood, Master. I’ll obey.”

Still astride her horse, she made her spear vanish, faced the King of Heroes and the bowman, and declared:

“We’ll meet again, golden king. And you, self-deceiving avenger. Next time, I swear to face you as a warrior, as martial etiquette demands.”

“Do you imagine I would allow a brigand who irreverently seeks one of my treasures to leave this place?”

“You’re a king, aren’t you? Narrow-mindedly pursuing a fugitive doesn’t suit a king. If you want to chase me, get down off your throne and run like a warrior.”

Tine expected the King of Heroes to respond with indignation. Gilgamesh, however, grinned fearlessly and made no move.

“You are fortunate,” he addressed her back. “Ordering me to descend from my throne is worthy of death... but I was already forgetting my position as king when I faced him. I will not call it self-admonition, but I will grant you a pardon in honor of my reunion with my friend. Accept this honor with gratitude.”

When he had finished his roundabout declaration, Gilgamesh turned to look at the other Archer.

“Of course, I cannot guarantee that he will turn a blind eye to you.”

As if in response, the boy’s voice rang out through the snow:

“What’s this? Is Her Majesty leaving? Well, I’m in a bit of a predicament myself, so let’s retreat for the moment, True Archer. Or would you prefer ‘Avenger’?”

Gilgamesh then glared at the forest itself.

“Your sentence is unchanged, base fiend. Even mongrels are beyond you,” he declared ill-humoredly.

After declaring the boy’s voice a “fiend,” the King of Heroes turned to the bowman and delivered a royal proclamation.

“It is meaningless to conceal your true name any longer, mongrel. Rather, if your goal is to defile half of yourself, would not naming yourself bring you closer to that ambition?”

Chapter 7: Day 1, Afternoon (1)

Arrogant to the last, Gilgamesh gave the bowman a royal order:

“You have my royal permission. Speak your own true name.”

The bowman cracked a wry smile at the absurd command. Then he shouldered his bow, and, beneath his leather covering, slowly opened his mouth to speak.

“My name is Alkeides.”



The horsewoman heard that name, and wordlessly shook her head.

Tine did not understand the import of the name at first. Soon, however, she singled out a sliver of memory from within her brain.

“The child of Amphitryon and Alcmene, in whose veins flows the blood of Mycenaean royalty.”

She remembered that it was the childhood name of a great hero — the name he had been given as a human.

“Golden king, mightiest of kings, who the kings of my acquaintance cannot even hope to equal, we shall meet again. Next time, I shall trample the divine power that slumbers in your innermost depths beneath my feet.”

He had barely finished speaking when the muddy magical energy that oozed from him enveloped him completely. It bored an empty hole in the forest’s snow-covered floor. An instant later, even the mud was gone, and the bowman had vanished as completely as if he had never existed at all.

“Well then, some other time, Your Majesties. If you’re ever in the mood for depravity, give me a call, okay? After all, I do have my origins in folly and madness! Ahahahahahaha! Aahahahahahahaha!”

The voice still had the quality of an innocent boy’s, but its laughter echoed insanely through the forest.

The voice had barely faded when the snowfield vanished like a mirage and the original ravine spread out around Tine and the Heroic Spirits.

The horsewoman, who had remained throughout, surveyed Tine and, for some reason, flashed a faint smile. Then, clasping her horse’s bridle, she gave her name:

“Now that he’s given his true name, I suppose it’s pointless to hide mine from you.”

Shaking her head in exasperation, the queen raised her voice:

“I am Hippolyta, child of Ares, the god of war, and Otrera, a priestess of Artemis. I am the war-chief of the proud Amazons! Golden king and young vassal, we shall meet again!”

No sooner had she finished her introduction than she galloped off on her horse. Then the horsewoman — Hippolyta — turned to specks of light along with her steed, and disappeared completely.

Tine had been through a shocking, if brief, time. While using magecraft to steady her own mind, she asked her own Servant, the King of Heroes:

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“With all due respect, Your Majesty... was it alright not to give your own name?”

“...”

At that, the King of Heroes slightly raised his eyebrows. Then he shook his head, as if to dismiss some thought, and looked up with a totally undaunted grin.

“Heh... They are not worthy to hear my name. If they stand before me once more, I will do them that honor.”

Tine nodded comprehendingly. She never doubted the king’s words. Then, one problem did occur to her.

“What did that voice that sounded like a little boy’s mean by ‘a predicament’?”

“Humph.”

At Tine’s question, the King of Heroes wiped the expression from his face, and stared in the direction of the city, which was visible from the ravine.

“It probably meant the brigand that spoiled my reunion with my friend.”

“?”

“I thought to dispel the curse of death with one swing of my property, but I never imagined it would conceal its tracks in such a form.”

“The curse of... death?”

Tine furrowed her brows.

“Fool,” Gilgamesh declared with his usual fearless grin. “Is it not discourteous to wear a look of worry in the royal presence?”

“You are under my royal protection. If you have the time to fear curses, spend it in awe of me.”

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The same time. Coalsman Special Corrections Center.

In the monitoring room, the numerous scenes projected onto banks of modern monitors through familiars and mystical surveillance devices created a warped atmosphere.

The room’s master, Faldeus, furrowed his brows as he viewed the accumulating data.

It appears that, as I thought, it will be necessary to eliminate Bazdilot soon.

No; his backers, the Scladio Family, are likely the real problem. Regardless of the Grail War’s outcome, we’ll lose our grip on the reins sooner or later at this rate. If that happens, we’ll lose any means of stopping them, even with the help of other departments — no, even with the full power of

the White House.

Faldeus inwardly wore a sour look, but he did not let it show on his face.

This was not his only problem. The particulars of the Kuruoka's movements still eluded him, and as long as the Servant they had summoned remained an unknown quantity, he could not afford to make any careless moves.

If the Heroic Spirit that silver wolf summoned — most likely the Babylonian clay doll — is Lancer, then the Kuruokas must have summoned Rider or Berserker.

The Heroic Spirit the silver wolf had summoned — Enkidu — appeared to be Lancer.

Jester Karture and his clique — now corpses — appeared to have summoned the woman Assassin.

The chief of police had summoned Caster, Alexandre Dumas père.

And Tine Chelk commanded Archer, Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes.

Flat Escardos appears to have had some type of communication with a Heroic Spirit in the park... The possibility of that being Berserker is slim. In which case, the Heroic Spirit the Kuruokas summoned is most probably Berserker.

He knew that the Kuruokas had been attempting to summon Shi Huangdi, but he could not see the point of summoning such a Heroic Spirit, who must excel in devising tactics and stratagems, as Berserker. If Shi Huangdi had manifested as Berserker due to some error, it was possible that the Kuruokas were under the thumb of the mad Servant. All of that, however, was no more than Faldeus' speculation.

He had considered sending his own Servant, the true Assassin, to investigate. In the unlikely event that the Kuruoka's Servant was his Assassin's natural enemy, however, he would end up losing a powerful pawn under his very nose.

It's just one thing after another.

Cashura, who had summoned Saber, had been killed by the fake Assassin. Doris Lusendra, who had summoned the true Rider, refused to cooperate with, or even contact, Faldeus. Haruri, who had been scheduled to summon the true Berserker, was out of contact. From Sigma, who should, following the order, have summoned Lancer, he had received only the short message: "I definitely summoned something, but I have no idea what it is. I will report again when I learn its true name."

Our objective is not to use the Holy Grail to grant a wish. It is to go beyond that... to advance the analysis of the Third Magic itself.

What would happen if you obtained the Grail and wished to obtain the Third Magic, Faldeus suddenly wondered. He judged that no good would come of such childish speculations, however, and decided to abandon them.

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There's no need to insist on the outcomes of individual battles... but our side does need to win.

Tine Chelk did not seek the Grail, but what would happen if she obtained it and wished for the destruction of the Snowfield Holy Grail System itself? Such worries set off alarm bells in Faldeus' brain.

In a worst case scenario, we can have a double agent eliminate Tine... but we would need to aim for an opportunity when the King of Heroes is engaged in combat with another Servant.

Before that, however... we need to ascertain Saber's movements. We should have cameras on every significant point in the city, but none of them show that woman with glasses. I was sure she would make contact with the Einzbern homunculus, but...

They had maintained surveillance of the “white woman” — the Einzbern homunculus. She had temporarily disappeared the previous night, but was currently caught in their surveillance net. Strangely, however, she had been in and out of shopping malls, casinos, and other such places since that morning. Faldeus could see no consistency in her behavior.

Possibly a trap to throw us off? I assume she must have noticed she's being watched.

It was entirely out of his hands. Problems were cropping up one after another, and it was giving Faldeus a headache. He could not help pressing a hand to the corners of his eyes.

“Chief Dioland.”

One of Faldeus Dioland's subordinates, a woman, called out to him.

“What is it, Aludra?”

“It's about the mages in the city who failed to become Masters... We're observing some strange movements.”

“?”

Faldeus looked at the report she handed him, then at several of the countless monitors.

“...Strange indeed.”

A significant percentage of the mages had left the city before noon. Many of them must have turned tail when they saw the crater in the desert. Many mages had also suffered injury at the hands of the fake Assassin — the full-fledged fanatic. Under the circumstances, it was only natural for mediocre mages to realize the matter was beyond them and flee.

The odd part was what happened next. All the mages that had fled the city that morning had turned their cars and bikes around and returned to Snowfield.

“...Could they have been hired by some other family as soon as they left the city?”

His first thought was an intervention by the Clock Tower. He considered it possible that they had observed the mages leaving the city and promised them some form of compensation for becoming pawns of the Clock Tower. That hypothesis, however, was refuted by Aludra's next words.

“It’s not just mages, sir.”

“...What?”

“All ordinary civilians who left the city on business, etcetera, after a certain time have turned back.”

An uneasy chill ran through Faldeus.

“...”

He keenly felt the inadequacy of his own awareness. Something was happening in the city; something on a scale greater than ordinary magecraft. He knew it was happening, but he did not know why.

A barrier for clearing the area of people? No... They’re returning to the city, so I suppose it would have to be a barrier for drawing people in... But for what purpose? I’ve heard that, in the fifth Fuyuki Grail War, there was a Heroic Spirit that tried to gather Od from civilians, but...

There were a lot of black boxes in the fifth Holy Grail War. He did not know what fate that Heroic Spirit had met. He had, however, received information that there had actually been mass fainting incidents at the time, and that the Holy Church had covered them up as gas leaks. Apparently rumors that gas had leaked from an unexploded chemical weapon dropped by the American military had spread among the local high school students, and Faldeus’ colleagues had conducted a follow-up operation to suppress counterfactual rumors... Or so he remembered hearing.

An unexploded chemical weapon... I wish it could be explained away with something like that. Considering our throughput, our hands are full with just the crater incident.

Snowfield has a population of eighty thousand... We’ve made arrangements so that we can deal with matters even if all of them were to disappear... But, if possible, I’d like to avoid anything so troublesome.

Or so Faldeus thought, when he noticed that his hand was clenched tight on something. It was a balled up scrap of notepaper covered in fragmentary writing. When Faldeus carefully spread it out, he saw that it was a message clearly addressed to himself.

Do you not notice?

The barrier walls of this facility are thick.

Therefore, *it* does not enter here.

“...”

In this Holy Grail War, Faldeus was contracted with the true Assassin, Hassan-i Sabbah. Hassan, however, rarely initiated conversation. In the first place, he seemed averse to actually speaking, so when he did communicate, it was usually through methods like this one. In addi-

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tion, the writing always looked as if Faldeus had scribbled it himself. It almost seemed designed to convince anyone who saw it that the Heroic Spirit Assassin was entirely a delusion of Faldeus'.

"And 'it' is...?" Faldeus muttered under his breath.

As if in answer, compression artifacts started to run across the screen of one of the computers sending and receiving data. A row of characters popped up, weaving its way through the gaps, and seared itself into Faldeus' brain. It was a short line, consisting only of an answer to Faldeus' question:

The cursed plague-wind.

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Two hours later. A cheap motel.

"Ah, we can finally go out!"

Flat Escardos opened the window curtains, and stretched his arms high over his head as he basked in the incoming sunshine.

"I never expected him to get that angry at me..."

Flat's big stretch only lasted a moment, then his shoulders drooped and he let out a sigh.

"And I can't believe the catalyst that summoned you, Jack, wasn't something the Professor prepared for me; it was all me jumping to conclusions..."

A gentlemanly voice emanated from the steampunk-esque watch on his left wrist.

"It can't be anything compared to how I feel knowing that I was summoned with a prize from a video game. Besides, shouldn't you be glad you got off with just a two-hour lecture?"

Berserker — Jack the Ripper — had become a Heroic Spirit Watch. Flat responded to his consolations with a little shake of his head.

"A whole two hours."

Flat collapsed onto the bed, clutching his newly-purchased cell phone, and curled up dejectedly.

Not fifteen seconds after Flat had emailed the phone number to his teacher, Lord El-Melloi II, he had received an international call from England. The roughly two hour lecture and just under thirty minute policy meeting had only just concluded.

Flat had barely picked up the phone when angry voice had roared out of it and launched into a lengthy sermon that even Jack — in wristwatch form — could hear. It had begun with Flat running off to America on his own, and extended to questioning on a variety of subjects, until...

"Who the hell did you learn the summoning spell from? I refuse to believe that you looked

it up on your own from materials in the Great Library. Was it Tōsaka?" The professor had asked.

"Oh, that's right. I should just have asked Rin... Actually, though, once I got here I did this and that, and sort of ended up summoning him without a circle or an incantation," Flat had answered truthfully, at which point, after several minutes of silence, the scolding had resumed even fiercer than before.

Flat's mental exhaustion appeared severe, but Jack deliberately hurled more hard words at him all the same.

"Bear up. I heard the whole thing, and as far as I can see it was concise, easily understood, and yet so sound as to brook no refutation. The problem lies with you for supplying enough material to stretch such an efficiently-delivered lecture out to that length. Content yourself with losing only two hours of time."

"That's not it, Jack."

"Call me Berserker. And what is it, then?"

In place of a head, Jack quizzically inclined his long minute hand.

"While he's in the Clock Tower, the Professor is hounded by so many responsibilities that he really can't afford to waste even a minute," Flat explained with a calmer expression. "But because of me, he had to waste a whole two hours. That makes me feel like I've really done something wrong..."

"I see... You're more considerate of your professor than I thought."

"There are only three or four people who are the Professor's apprentice and don't respect him!"

"So there are a fair number, then...? Still, even just hearing him speak over the phone, I could tell that he must be an exemplary teacher of magecraft. Bearing in mind that you say he survived a past Holy Grail War, he must be a first-class mage as well."

Jack merely related his honest impressions. Flat's face lit up.

"Of course! It's not just the Grail War; the Professor solves all sorts of cases at the Clock Tower too! There was 'The Divided Castle Adra: The Moonlit Crest Contest Serial Killings,' and 'Dangerous Beauty: Vanishing at the Towers of the Twin Faces,' and 'The Super Express: Judgment Eye' and, umm..."

"I see. I'm sure you continue to inflict a great deal of damage on your professor's stomach by arbitrarily naming his cases and tell them with enough bells and whistles for a steam engine."

"Oh, I don't add anything to them. The Professor really is legendary at the Clock Tower! Oh, I know! Do you want to try talking to him on the phone a bit more? He's busy, like I told you just now, so I think it would have to be quick, but..."

Jack considered Flat's suggestion for a few moments, then gave a big shake of his minute

hand.

“Thank you, but no. I only spoke with him briefly earlier, but he seemed to see right through me... Yes... he had an air almost as if he was going to rearrange me into something else.”

“Oh... Well, everyone who talks with the Professor does say that, but it’s not like he means badly...”

“Yes, I understand that it’s not intentional. I’m sure it’s just a habit of his. Nevertheless, his ability to see through to a person’s true nature is vaguely terrifying. I worry that if I kept talking to him I might end up feeling satisfied with my own existence from that alone, and pass on without ever getting my wish.”

“I see...”

Flat sounded disappointed as he sat up in bed.

“But I have learned that he can be trusted,” Jack continued. “One of the more mage-like mages I know of would have humored me and used every trick in the book to coax me into abandoning the Grail War and lure me to the Clock Tower. My very existence is a valuable research subject, after all. The fact that he did not must mean that he is either too softhearted for a mage, or a person capable of looking at the big picture instead of immediate loss or gain.”

They really had spoken only briefly, but Jack felt a certain degree of trust in — and a sort of sympathy for — the man called Lord El-Melloi II. The latter boiled down to the feeling that Flat must have put his professor through a great deal of trouble as well.

Blissfully unaware that his own lack of inhibitions had produced a feeling of solidarity between his teacher and his Servant over the telephone, Flat threw open the curtains and surveyed the bright sunlight outside.

“That’s right! The Professor is an amazing person! He can see way farther ahead than me, and...”

Flat stood staring out the window.

“What’s wrong?” The wristwatch asked. “It’s better not to show your face too much. I believe your professor just instructed you to ‘keep quiet and lay low.’”

“Oh, he did, but I was just thinking... The fog is awfully thick...”

“What fog?”

Jack looked out the window as well, perhaps intrigued by a word with a connection to himself, but all he saw was a clear view illuminated by brilliant sunshine.

“What are you talking about? There’s no fog out there.”

Jack wondered if Flat suffered from some disease of the eyes. The smile vanished from Flat’s face as he answered:

“No... That’s not what I mean... A fog of magical energy... I mean, there’s been a little of it

ever since I got here, so I thought it might be due to the Grail's influence, but..."

"?"

Flat's speech was fragmented. He observed the scenery outside the window for a short while, then spoke in a grave tone.

"Berserker, this could be rather bad."

"What is it?"

"We might be surrounded by something... extremely dangerous..."

"Is an enemy Heroic Spirit attacking? Have they set a ward around the motel!?"

Jack did not really understand what Flat meant by "fog," but he did understand that, while Flat was a natural airhead, he was not the type of person to joke about such things. When he heard Flat's answer, however, Jack wished that he was.

"Oh, not just the motel... At minimum, this thing covers the whole city."

Interlude

“Watcher”

Interlude: Watcher

The wetland mansion.

Time rewinds to when the King of Heroes faced the mystery bowman.

The Heroic Spirits summoned for the Holy Grail War are, fundamentally, divided into seven classes: Saber, Archer, Lancer, Caster, Rider, Assassin, and Berserker. It is said, however, than an “Extra Class,” corresponding to none of these, is very occasionally summoned. Records remain to testify that a Heroic Spirit belonging to a class called “Avenger” was actually summoned in the third Fuyuki Grail War.

Sigma, seated in a study chair on the ground floor of the mansion, had been apprised of this information.

“So?” He asked. “Is this ‘Watcher’ an Extra Class?”

A “shadow” — the boy with wings attached to his back — appeared to answer Sigma’s question.

“Not exactly. Under the Fuyuki system, an Extra Class never replaces one of the three knights. Going by the remaining phases, the Servant meant to fight in the Holy Grail War must be Lancer. Only you, not the Heroic Spirit, will be that Lancer. What you called forth is a lookout, and an obstacle you must overcome to become Lancer while living.”

“I know what your words mean. I’ve slept and thought them over again since you told me this morning, but I can’t accept that answer. A human becoming Lancer doesn’t even make sense.”

Sigma dispassionately stated his opinion.

“We never expected you to start with a nap, either. Well, it’s this whole Grail War that doesn’t make sense. If we manifested as a proper Extra Class — although it’s odd to talk about an Extra Class being ‘proper’ — we’d probably manifest as ‘Gatekeeper,’” the shadow replied in the form of the boy with the serpent staff.

“Although it’s doubtful whether the rule that one of the three knights can’t become an Extra Class applies. As ‘shadows,’ we’ve received a certain degree of information concerning this War from the Grail, but that information is based on the original Fuyuki rules. This Snowfield Grail War is too much of a departure.”

“It is a fake; these things happen,” Sigma easily assented with a shrug.

“The ‘Watcher’ you summoned,” the shadow continued, “has already started observing this

city. And apparently it's already spotted a tear."

"What do you mean?"

"The Heroic Spirit that was supposed to be summoned as Archer, one of the three knights, has been transmuted into the Extra Class Avenger, and things that should never have been summoned had crept into this land, drawn to each other."

At that point the child vanished, and the "captain" appeared in a corner, leaning on a cane.

"Yes, I can feel a presence like to my own out toward the ravine..."

"What do you mean, 'like your own'?"

"A nostalgic scent that makes my blood boil. I feel pure rage bubbling up from my very bowels. Oh, if I had been summoned as a proper Heroic Spirit, I would have manifested not as a rider, but as a class founded on vengeance. I cannot but regret that I am not — that I am here as its shadow."

The emotion gradually vanished from the words, and Sigma sensed the eerie dynamism roiling like cold magma at their bottom, but he made no attempt to pursue the conversation. The self-proclaimed shadows occasionally spoke to him of regret or hatred, but he took no interest in any of it. It did not seem likely to furnish a clue to the true name of the Heroic Spirit he had summoned, so his policy was to act as if he did not hear it.

But, perhaps owing to his inborn nature, or to the special training he had undergone since infancy, every word that reached his ears was faithfully recorded in his brain. Even words he meant to ignore.

Nevertheless, he could not go on listening to the shadows grumble forever. Sigma put together what little he had gleaned from the earlier conversation, and decided to pose them a question.

"In short, you objectively observe the Holy Grail War in this city... Is that correct?"

"Not us; the thing you summoned... to be precise."

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Somewhere in the city. Dumas' study.

"...Since this morning, I've been getting a weird feeling that I'm being watched."

Caster — Alexandre Dumas père — cocked his head to the side and glanced around. He was in the room that had been allotted to him, "revising" the hydra-venom dagger.

Everything looked as usual. He saw the countless bookshelves and mountains of books, the

numerous different dishes and snacks arranged on the table, the notebook computer connected to the internet, the wired telephone in an old-fashioned design.

But something was different. He felt uneasy, as if the quality of the space itself had changed.

Dumas flashed his teeth in a broad grin and merrily resumed his work.

“Well, who cares? Everything’s better with an audience.”

Merrily, merrily, as if to declare that even accident was one of the charms of the drama.

“I’d be damned if I took in an extravaganza this huge on my lonesome! Ha ha!”

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The wetland mansion.

“Then tell me, what do I look like from your point of view?”

A sudden surge of curiosity prompted Sigma to question the shadows.

Sigma had never pondered his own identity. He was as little interested in himself as he was in events in the wider world. He did not even know his own precise age. He was often taken for being in his late teens, but he had a feeling he had stopped growing and aging several years earlier.

“Those wannabes fiddled with your body too much back when you were a child soldier,” his employer had jibed. “I guess your life span’s probably shorter than a normal person’s. Like, you’ll be young for a long time, but when your time comes you’ll age rapidly, and that’s all she wrote.”

She was probably right, but he did not care. He knew that, given his line of work, his chances of dying of old age were extremely slim.

He was, however, interested in what he was.

Sigma did not believe in gods or Buddhas. The moment he became a participant in the Holy Grail War, he realized the existence of “powers” far beyond him. That understanding did not, of course, mean that he put any faith in them.

Sigma merely wanted to know what one of those great powers thought of him. It would probably say that he was trash, or that he might as well not exist. He expected it to conclude that his life had no value, but he still had to ask. He had no intention of complying if it told him to die, but if it told him that his existence was meaningless, Sigma would not have been able to substantiate a rebuttal.

While Sigma was thinking all of that, the child with the serpent staff was shaking his head with a troubled expression.

“Sorry, but Watcher can’t see into the past. It’s only been observing events since the moment

it was summoned. So, as far as Watcher is concerned, you aren't anyone yet."

"There's no 'yet'; I'm going to go on being nobody."

"I wonder. That means you could become anyone. And if you obtain the Grail, you could gain power to rival Heroic Spirits."

The Holy Grail, omnipotent granter of wishes. Sigma pondered again what he would do if he did obtain it. As before, however, no wish for such an exalted artifact occurred to him.

"...I wonder... If I did get the Grail, could I have more ordinary dreams? Dreams as in aspirations, not the kind you see at night," Sigma explained disjointedly.

"Oh, that's a good idea!" The child with the serpent staff assented brightly. "Yes, I'm sure you could dream, if you got the Grail. Just like Watcher goes on observing reality."

"The ability to observe what happens in the city... I bet a normal Servant could win the Grail War easily with that."

"Precisely, boy! I see you've finally put it together."

The Captain flashed a wicked grin.

"Indeed, if the other participants were to learn of your ability, they would fight to claim you before going after the Grail!"

"...What?"

Sigma furrowed his brows slightly. He considered for a moment and realized that what the Captain said made sense.

"I see. At present, I'm effectively a resource."

"You're a one-of-a-kind resource dropped smack in the middle of the battlefield, boy. The struggle to claim you will be a fierce one."

"I don't mind. I just don't want to get dragged into it and die."

He might not have dreams, but he disliked pain and he did not want to die or to starve. Sigma considered his best course to fulfill those minimal desires.

"Then get stronger," the boy with wings on his back told him with a kind smile. "If you don't want to get dragged in, join the side that drags others in."

"Don't be unreasonable. Even my employer is a crazy mage."

"Overcome your obstacles. Watcher will keep giving you trials you may well call unreasonable. Overcome them and, little by little, you'll become somebody. You won't be just Soldier A anymore."

Sigma considered the winged boy's words for a moment, still expressionless. Then, for the first time, he decided to disagree. It was a modest first step toward declaring his intent to escape death.

"I'm not Soldier A;

“I’m... Σ.”

Chapter 8

“The Wandering King’s Rock’n’Roll”

Chapter 8: Day 1, Afternoon (2)

The Wandering King's Rock'n'Roll

In the forest.

What am I doing? Ayaka Sajou asked herself for the umpteenth time in twenty-four hours. *Actually, what am I doing?* She wondered absentmindedly as she stroked the fluffy belly of the beautiful animal snuggled up beside her.

Oh, right, the Grail War.

The silver beast rubbed its head against her, keening.

Or at least that's what I thought.

The creature was warm. Ayaka decided to think over what she had done in the past half day.

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Half a day earlier. Central Snowfield.

Ayaka was walking briskly, trying to put as much distance between herself and the police station as she could. The sun was barely up. Behind her, she heard Saber let out a sigh of relief.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. I just got a friend of mine to check out the police station, and they tell me the prisoners have been temporarily evacuated."

"So?"

"I gave the police officers my word that I would remain in their custody until dawn. I was thinking that I ought to return, but I was worried about leaving you alone. I was just wondering whether I should leave someone with you. But if the police station has stopped functioning, then, well, I suppose I can consider my obligation fulfilled. I did remain confined there until just before it closed," Saber explained cheerfully.

This time it was Ayaka's turn to sigh.

"You actually planned to keep that promise?"

"Contracts are important. Breaking one brings misfortune not only on the breaker, but on those who get involved with him."

"I don't really get it... And what did you mean, 'leave someone with me'? You're on your own."

"No I'm not; I'm with you."

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Saber tried to deflect the question with a joke. Ayaka shot him a withering look.

“Ha ha. Glaring at me won’t get me to show my hand here. Oh, but if you’re really curious, I could give you a hint...”

“Don’t need it.”

Ayaka shot an even icier glare at Saber, then let out another big sigh.

“I guess it is true you were worried about me, though... I still think it’s none of your business, but... thank you.”

Ayaka’s thanks trailed off. Saber smiled and shook his head.

“No need to thank me. I really am poking my nose in where I’m not wanted. If you thank me just for acting on my whims, it might encourage me to be even more officious. I know; if you’re tired of walking, why don’t I fetch you a horse? I’m sure William will produce one if I spend a bit of magical energy...”

“No, I’m fine, really!” Ayaka remonstrated with the Heroic Spirit. She did not know what he might do if left to his own devices. Then she voiced a question that had been on her mind for some time.

“Wait, who’s William? If you don’t want to tell me anything, why do you keep throwing out names of people I don’t know?”

Saber looked away for a moment, then responded with a disarming laugh.

“Oh, it’s just that you were looking so glum and lonely. I thought it might cheer you up if I hinted that we have lots of invisible friends, so...”

“That’s just creepy. Stop it.”

“Understood; I’ll stop. It doesn’t really matter; I’ll tell you about ‘everybody’ in good time.”

“You really don’t have to... But there were the lights, and they might have helped with other things without my knowing, so would you tell them ‘thanks’ for me...?”

Saber’s eyes widened for a moment, then he smiled.

“You have a surly look, Ayaka, but I see you’re a kind girl.”

“Sorry for looking surly...”

An unexpected voice broken in on the conversation.

“Yo, little missy!”

“Huh?”

“I knew it; you’re the girl from yesterday. You look like you’re coming from over by the police station. You okay?”

Ayaka turned, sure that she had heard that voice somewhere quite recently, and saw a young man with hairstyle too gaudy for anyone who had seen it to ever forget. He was a man in flashy punk fashion with a mohawk, a neck tattoo, and piercings all over his face and ears — the

drugstore employee Ayaka had asked for directions to her hotel when she first entered the city.

"You're that..."

"Man, what a coincidence running into you here. Who's he? Your boyfriend?"

"No, nothing like that. He's... just someone I know."

Ayaka could not explain a Servant to an ordinary passerby.

As for Saber, he stared intently at the man with the mohawk and the other young punks nearby before asking an innocently:

"I apologize for asking such an ill-bred question, but did you sew those theatrical garments yourselves, or are they the work of a specialized craftsman? Would you mind if I also enquired if it was yourselves who did up that hair, so full of rebellious spirit?"

Saber's eyes shone. The band looked at each other.

"Where's your boyfriend from?" The mohawk man asked Ayaka.

"I told you he's not my boyfriend," Ayaka began by repeating that denial.

"England," Saber answered, ignoring her. "Although, even if you include London and Winchester, I wasn't there for very long."

"Huh. I thought they were pretty real over there."

Saber's eyes lighted on the guitar case slung over the bewildered mohawk man's shoulder, then widened as if he had put something together.

"Might you be minstrels?"

"Minstrels? Man, that's a weird way of putting it."

"Oh, my apologies; the knowledge I've been granted is far from impartial... Where might I hear you play? A church? A tavern? The theater? Oh, but I just destroyed it...!"

It would be easy to take Saber's words for mockery. To Ayaka's ears, however, they sounded oddly free of malice. Before now he had always acted just a little aloof; now there was a childlike innocence to his questions. The sight made Ayaka realize something.

I think... he might be into music.

The mohawk man and his friends seemed to have taken Saber's questions the same way Ayaka had — she could not tell if this was the influence of the charisma he possessed as a Heroic Spirit — and to have recognized him as an eccentric music-lover.

"I don't really get you, but us, play in a church? Ha! That's a good one. Reminds me of that Whoopi Goldberg movie."

"Is that the name of a famous singer?"

"Well, something like that," the mohawk man shrugged. "We were playing an all-night gig, when there were gunshots or explosions or something. The cops put out some kind of evacuation order, so our audience got kicked out."

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“...What a disaster,” Ayaka nodded. Remembering what she had seen of the fight between the priest and the vampire made her break out in a cold sweat.

“Hey, you guys want to hear us play? It’s free.”

“Oh, umm...”

Ayaka, aware that they were supposed to be in hiding, and self conscious about accepting anything for free, was about to decline, when...

“Are you sure? Thank you! You’re fine fellows. Even once I’ve returned to the Throne, I will not forget this debt!”

When she saw Saber with a blazing gleam in his eyes, looking as delighted as a child who has just met a movie star for the first time, Ayaka was sure.

No doubt about it. This hero is really into music.

Several minutes later.

The mohawk man and his bandmates were showing Ayaka and Saber into an underground nightclub.

“The stairs are pretty steep, so watch your step. Sorry, but this building’s too old for an elevator or anything fancy like that,” the mohawk explained apologetically. He had apparently mistaken Ayaka’s intention in asking whether the building had an elevator. Ayaka felt a little guilty about that.

Still, she thought, this Heroic Spirit looks like he’s got to be from the Middle Ages... I don’t know much about punk and metal and all that, but won’t anything this flashy rock band plays be totally different from any music from his time? It would have been more... classical? No, Saber’s probably used to hearing stuff way older than Mozart or Beethoven.

What’ll I do if he explodes when he hears rock...? There are a lot of people who get mad about youth-oriented music, even in this time...

Pessimistic but having nowhere else to go, Ayaka let herself be swept along in the wake of Saber and the band members. She resolved that if Saber shouted, “This is no music!” Or something and made a scene, she would try out the power of these “Command Seals” and drag him away by force.

“Command Seals,” huh...? I’ve been told how to use them, but I wonder if they’ll really work. We haven’t made a formal contract... and my Command Seals are fake to begin with...

Fake Command Seals, created solely to usurp the rights of a Master. These five designs had been planted in Ayaka’s body by the “white woman” immediately before her arrival in Snowfield. The white woman had said that they possessed the same power to command a Servant as genuine Command Seals did, but Ayaka doubted how much of that was true. This Holy Grail War

had, after all, turned out a lot different from what the white woman had told Ayaka.

"The Holy Grail War is a secret battle to the death fought where no one can see," she said, and even that's not right...

And even if these Command Seals were real, would I be able to use them like a mage...?

Weighed down by anxiety, she descended the stairs, prepared to find a fresh hell waiting for her at the bottom of them.

Ayaka's fears turned out to be groundless.

"Astounding...!"

Ayaka, Saber, and the remaining staff were the lonely concert's only audience. The instant the performance came to an end, however, Saber's thunderous applause was enthusiastic enough to match a hundred fans.

"Marvelous! Moving! I must present this feeling in an ode to Avalon — No, it needs no ornamentation! Simply 'marvelous' will suffice! Isn't it wonderful, Ayaka? Do all the minstrels of this era play with such intensity?"

"Huh? Oh, umm..."

Ayaka fumbled for an answer.

"What is the music they just played called?" Saber, eyes shining, asked quietly, so that only Ayaka could hear. "It's unlike anything heard in my time. What genre is it? I can't think why the Throne didn't give me this knowledge; nothing could be more important! It's possible that something may be amiss with this Grail War after all."

"I'm pretty sure the only thing 'amiss' here is you... This is, umm... punk? Or maybe metal...?"

"Oh, you can call it whatever," the mohawked guitarist broke in. He had walked over once he was done playing and overheard Ayaka. Seeing the pair whispering must have sparked his interest.

"There were a bunch of guys in here a little while ago fighting about whether its metal or punk, but we just do what we feel like. Plain rock and roll's fine."

Seeing Saber simply enjoying their music without quibbling over what to call it seemed to make him a little embarrassed.

"Rock and roll! I see!"

Saber then turned his eyes to the electric guitar in the mohawk mans hands.

"So this is a modern instrument! It sounded peculiar when I first heard it, but that thunderous roar harmonized wonderfully with the melody! It felt like it reached through my guts to grip my soul!"

The mohawk man seemed mystified to hear Saber speak as if he had never seen an electric

guitar before.

“...Man, I thought you were just talking about subgenres. Was this actually your first time hearing rock?”

“Oh, so ‘rock and roll’ shortens to ‘rock.’ Yes, ashamed as I am to admit it, I’ve never heard it before. I may have, in another time and another place, but my present self, at least, has no memory of it. I never imagined I would have a chance to be so impressed!”

“I don’t get you, man... What rock in England have you been living under?”

“You sure you didn’t time slip out of the Middle Ages?” The woman who played bass joked. A wry grin was the best Ayaka could manage.

The mohawk man proffered his electric guitar to Saber, who was watching it with childlike glee.

“You want to give it a try?”

“...May I?”

After that, Saber’s solo performance began. Seeing him begin to master the guitar within moments of touching it for the first time confirmed Ayaka in the slightly misguided notion that, as he had what it took to become a hero, he could do anything. She had to take care to avoid being captivated by the notes he played.

While Ayaka was doing nothing in a corner, the band members — including the mohawk man, who had brought out another guitar — began to harmonize with Saber’s sound. They even started recording the performance with a video camera by the time they were done.

The band seemed so taken with Saber that the conversation eventually turned to what they should have for breakfast. Not only that, but they must have given up some suitable unused clothes from the dressing room to him, because at some point he had removed his armor and could now be taken for a more reserved member.

The fact that, coupled with the red streaks in his hair, the outfit suited him fairly well only further exasperated Ayaka.

I refused to participate, so I know I’m not one to talk... but does this Heroic Spirit even take this fight for the Grail seriously...?

When the band members announced they were going to change and filed into a spare room, Saber came up beside Ayaka, who was sitting on the edge of the stage.

“Are you alright, Ayaka? Aren’t you going to sleep?”

“I’m wide awake. Hard not to be, after all that electric guitar.”

“Ha ha. Sorry about that.”

Smiling merrily, Saber took a seat beside Ayaka.

"Here underground," he informed her in a low voice, "there are no Mystic Codes, and no surveillance devices linked to the outside. If you're going to sleep, now's the time."

When she heard that, Ayaka's eyes widened behind her glasses. She had been sure that Saber had been carried away by the music and completely forgotten that they were on the run, let alone the Holy Grail War. She had never imagined that he was thinking that far ahead.

"Then, it was all an act?"

"What was?"

"Well... the way you acted like you were blown away by the music, and..."

"Perish the thought! I was truly and deeply moved! Weren't you?"

"To be honest," Saber continued, staring around at the audience seating, "at first my idea was to slip into someplace out of sight of enemy mages, and have a little fun hearing modern music while we were at it. I was truly fortunate to encounter such altered tunes. I want to thank you for not stopping me."

"Well, I couldn't, the way the mood was going. That guy with the mohawk's nice, despite how he looks."

Ayaka sighed.

"To be honest, I didn't even mind the music. Although you were making so much noise I had to back off a bit."

"I see. Sorry about that... But weren't they incredible? They put their depression and anger into their lyrics without turning them into simple complaints! I've only been accustomed to hearing chansons de geste of the great King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table."

Saber sounded nostalgic for his past, but his eyes were still shining.

This hero's the opposite of me, Ayaka thought, watching him. He talks about all sorts of things like he genuinely enjoys them, while I can't seem to think positively about anything...

He probably won't be able to get the Grail because he's tied to someone like me.

"Hey."

"What is it? If you're sleepy, I can ask if there's any bedding for you."

"Not that... What do you want to wish on the Grail for?"

"Now that's a surprise." Saber sounded a little startled. "I never expected you to ask about anything to do with the Grail War."

"It's not that weird. I was just thinking that, if you've got a really important reason... I'd have to apologize to you. I mean, it doesn't seem like I'll be any help to you in getting it."

Saber looked taken aback.

"You were worried about that? You supply me with the magical energy to remain corporeal."

How could you not be helpful?”

“Well, sorry. I’m a coward, even if I don’t look like it.”

Ayaka turned her face away from Saber. Seeing that, Saber looked troubled for a moment before speaking.

“Why do I want the Grail...? I’d like to know that myself.”

“What do you mean? You answered the summons because you wanted the Grail, didn’t you?”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be, but even now that I’ve been summoned, I don’t have a clear idea what I want it for... What mages call the ‘Throne’ is a special place. Even time and world lines are all mixed up, to say nothing of space. It’s possible that I might find a reason to want the Grail when I’m summoned in another time or place, but at the very least I don’t have those memories now.”

“I don’t really get what you mean about time and memories, but... isn’t there something? It can grant any wish, right?”

“I’d be lying if I said I have no regrets about my conduct in life, but that’s nothing to wish on the Grail about. Well, if I do get it, I suppose I could always incarnate and set about studying this era’s music and theater in earnest. It might be meaningless, but I’d like to take as many songs and tales of valor as I can back with me to where my soul was — the ‘Throne’ I mentioned earlier.”

Ayaka could not tell if Saber was joking or if he was serious. When she turned back to look at him, a serious, pensive expression met her eyes. When she saw that, Ayaka knew at least that the words had not been a ploy to mask his real intentions — Saber genuinely did not know why he had been summoned as a seeker of the Holy Grail.

“Heroic Spirits must have all sorts of reasons for desiring the Grail. There are probably even some with plans for it other than making a wish... Destroying it, for example. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Assassin who was there when I was summoned had something like that in mind.

“It is the Grail that the great King Arthur sought. As I hold King Arthur in high regard, I would like to obtain it myself,” Saber continued, reminiscing about his past. “It want to present it at King Arthur’s true grave... but not enough to crush the ambitions of other heroes, or put others in harm’s way.”

When Saber had finished speaking, there was a brief pause. Then, with a wry smile, he nodded his assent to empty air.

“Yes, you’re right. I’m not one to talk. I did, after all, let you shoot me while I was dazzled by treasures tied to the Round Table. But couldn’t you also say I’ve learned my lesson admirably?”

“You’re talking to somebody I can’t see again...” Ayaka sighed, wondering what the point of his earlier promise had been.

The next instant, her sigh became a gasp.

“I’ll introduce you. The mystic pass will get a bit stronger...”

The words were barely out of his mouth when he touched the tattoo on Ayaka’s right hand.

“Hey, what are you—”

Just then, a vivid “scene” invaded her mind.

“Oh...”

She could see what looked like the watchtower of a European castle and, in its center, a man wrapped head to toe in bandages, with a crossbow in his hand. He was staring at her. The eyes that peered out from between the bandages were piercing as the eyes of a hawk that has sighted prey, but also kind.

The man looked at her, averted his eyes awkwardly, then nodded.

As soon as he did, Ayaka saw the nightclub again.

“What was...?”

Ayaka was bewildered by the unreal scene she had been shown.

“Pierre Basile. A master archer.”

“Who?”

He had called it an introduction, but the name alone meant nothing to Ayaka. She was about to ask for further explanation. When she heard Saber’s next words, however, she ended up just flapping her lips wordlessly, like a goldfish.

“The man who killed me.”

“...What?”

“I can use two Noble Phantasms — my trump cards,” Saber began to explain his peculiarities as a Heroic Spirit to a dumbfounded Ayaka. “One of them is to take the souls of several fellows I choose — with their consent — transcribe them from the Throne, etcetera, and make them accompany me.

“I can’t manifest them and keep them materialized from throughout. If I wanted to make them corporeal as well, it would require an unreasonable quantity of magical energy. So much that any ordinary mage would run dry in no time at all.”

“Oh, umm...”

“On the other hand, I can use my own magical energy as a medium to have them assist me with their skills and magecraft. Like the arrow that deflected that woman’s arm in the opera

house, or the glowing droplets I used in the police station when it was pitch black. Also, they can converse normally with me, but it seems they can't talk with you, Ayaka, unless we make a fresh transfer of magical energy, like we did just now."

"...Okay, wait."

Ayaka's face stiffened. It was not as though she had not understood his explanation. She was ignorant of magecraft, but the white woman had pounded the bare minimum into her head, so she knew what his words meant. It was because she understood that Ayaka could not accept what Saber was doing.

"As for my other Noble Phantasm..."

"I said wait! Wait!"

"What's wrong?"

Saber stopped, startled by Ayaka's raised voice.

"What are you thinking, telling me this all of a sudden?" Ayaka went on, fingers pressed to her temples. "Telling me the name of the guy that killed you is like telling me your true name!"

"Oh, you know about Pierre?"

"...No. Sorry, but I don't know who Pierre is, and to be honest, I haven't figured out who you are yet, either. But if some mage who knows their history better overheard you'd, they'd know for sure!"

"Maybe I'm not very well known..." Saber muttered, tilting his head quizzically. He made a stark contrast to the flustered Ayaka.

"Well, I suppose they would," he nodded, looking grave. "But that's not really an issue; I intend to tell you my true name."

"What are you thinking!?"

"I told you back at the police station that I'd tell you when the opportunity presented itself, didn't I? There's no fear of mages overhearing us now; it strikes me as the perfect time. It will be difficult to block all prying eyes in an inn or on the city streets."

In the nightclub, on the other hand, there were at least no familiars or listening devices. Saber himself had said so. In which case, now, while the band was back in their changing room, was probably the time to speak. But there were still a heap of more fundamental problems.

"...I understand your reasoning, but you'd better stop."

"Why?" Saber asked. He sounded curious.

"You and I are just linked by magical energy, right?" Came Ayaka's forceful rejoinder. She was trying to stop Saber more seriously than ever before. "We're not even formally Master and Servant! So you'd better save your true name for when you find a better Master. Telling someone like me will only bring you—"

“Our name is Richard, Duke of Normandy and King of England!”

Saber’s face turned suddenly grave. He cut short Ayaka’s protestations by clearly speaking his own true name.

“...”

“Well, add a ‘former’ to both now that I’m dead,” Saber shrugged, flashing another impish grin at Ayaka, who was staring speechlessly at him with her mouth hanging open.

“My epithet, ‘Lionheart,’ is probably more famous than my true name or my titles.”

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The present. In the forest.

I’ve gotten mixed up with one hell of a king.

Even after revealing his true name, Saber’s attitude toward Ayaka remained unchanged. She had been nearly bowled over when she first heard that he was a king. After seeing him impressed by the fast food the band had bought them and single mindedly listening to music in the club, however, she had decided not to pay any special mind to what he had been in life.

“Jazz... classical... blues... pop... All superb! Oh, pastorela, estampie, descort... Even the poets of the south have shown new breadth in their songs!”

The club was equipped with a huge collection of music CDs from all over the world — possibly a hobby of its owner — and Saber had new words of heartfelt praise for each one he heard.

“Ayaka, this ‘enka’ from your country is wonderfully lyrical, and these ‘anime songs’ are full of narrative and variety! And this land’s ‘rap’ so skillfully layers word and sound; it’s a revelation!”

The more of that she heard from Saber, the less he seemed like a king who demanded respect. Thinking that she could, however, respect him as a human being, Ayaka ended up listening along with him to a wider variety of music.

“The music of England, too, is enthralling in its great diversity, from nostalgic hymns and folk songs to ‘progressive rock’! It brings home to me all over again that music is freedom!”

He had finished by watching the Woopi Goldberg movie the mohawk man had mentioned on DVD, saying:

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"I see, so this is a 'movie'! A fine thing, although the feel of it differs from theater! Oh, this choir is superb!"

Ayaka had succumbed to sleepiness around the time Saber had started watching musicals, and had ended up napping on the nightclub sofa. Before she knew it, it was noon.

Once they had said their thanks to the mohawk man and his bandmates and left the club, Saber had suddenly announced:

"Alright, let's ally with someone."

After that, they had entered the forest, from which he claimed to sense the presence of a Heroic Spirit particularly strongly, and encountered a long-haired Servant beautiful enough to take Ayaka's breath away, although she could not tell if they were a man or a woman. Saber had launched into conversation with considerable familiarity for a first meeting, but the other did not appear to take offense.

"And? What do you want with me?" The Heroic Spirit asked, facing him.

Saber glanced at Ayaka before replying.

"Well, I don't know your true name, or what sort of Heroic Spirit you are... but I thought I'd walk around and ask the first Servant I came across."

Then Saber made his proposal. Even Ayaka, who had heard it beforehand, thought it too unreasonable.

"Would you care to form an alliance with me?"

He really just came right out and said it... The people in the countries he ruled must have had a rough time.

Ayaka heaved a little sigh and escaped from reality as she stroked the silver beast's back.

Anyway, this dog's huge, but it sure is friendly and cute.

While she was busy playing with the animal she took for a dog, the Heroic Spirit facing Saber replied with a gentle smile.

"I wouldn't particularly mind... but myself aside, what benefit would there be for my Master?"



At that, Saber shot another look at Ayaka and shrugged.

"If you care for your Master, wouldn't it be better to avoid approaching an enemy thoughtlessly?"

"I could say the same to you... Or so I would like to say, but it seems neither of us need be concerned about that."

"Yes, I'm sure we've both taken defensive measures... but our all-important Masters are as you see."

I wonder what they're talking about.

Ayaka, sitting at the foot of a large tree, was puzzled by the conversation, but she became engrossed in the feel of the fluffy silver beast resting its head on her lap and set her doubts aside for the time being.

Big dogs sure are warm. I wonder if that Heroic spirit keeps it as a pet.

The silver beast seemed not unsatisfied itself. It lay on its belly across her thighs and allowed her to massage its fur as she pleased.

Saber, watching the girl and the beast, sighed.

"I thought they were more wary of humans."

"My Master's relationship with people is a little unique. He doesn't like humans, by any means. I think your Master is a special case; mine seems to think of her as a friend or ally."

"Maybe because they're both unusual Masters. Well, she isn't one, actually."

When he was done with what sounded like jokes, Saber said:

"So, as for the reason I brought up an alliance... Last night, I spotted a monster in the city."

"A monster?"

"I don't know if you know them, but they're called vampires, and they feed on humans' life blood. They're humanity's natural enemy and the Holy Church's sparring partners. Oh, first, do you know about the Holy Church?"

Saber started with the basics. The long-haired Heroic Spirit shook his head.

"Only the information I received from the Grail. There was not yet a Holy Church in my time. As for these bloodsucking monsters... I wonder. There were monsters that fed on flesh and blood, but I do not know if they were the same."

"Oh-ho. Might you be my venerable predecessor in history, then?"

"There's nothing impressive about that; it just means I was born first and I died first. As far I'm concerned, it is the people who were born later who deserve respect. They blaze a trail to the stars without relying on mystery."

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Saber laughed. After a brief pause, however, he wiped the smile from his face.

“There’s something strange about this Grail War. I have a feeling something is happening that the knowledge I received from the Grail cannot fully explain. Do you have any ideas?”

“...”

“Only, I was thinking that if the Grail War has been caught up in — or is being used for — some calamity, we ought to eliminate that first, then make a fresh start.”

Saber glanced at Ayaka as he spoke, then lowered his voice so that she could not hear.

“As things are, I can’t be sure of Ayaka’s safety, even if she seeks sanctuary with the Church after my defeat. A vampire would have no scruples about attacking her there.”

“I see your Master means a lot to you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t show this much concern for her if she’d been a willing Master from the start. She refused to participate in the Holy Grail War, but she got dragged in anyway because she was linked to me. If I were to abandon her without taking responsibility for that, it would sully the names of the nations that succeed to my line and the great kings of the past.”

The other Heroic Spirit chuckled at Saber making such a grand proclamation in such hushed tones and nodded.

“How funny. You must be a king, but you’re nothing like the king I know. Especially the way you seem to make more friends than most.”

“Is that so? I’d say you’ve got more friends than me.”

“I consider every living thing in this world a friend, although the feeling is often one-sided.”

As he spoke, the long-haired Heroic Spirit gently shut his eyes and spread his arms, palms up. As he did so, the ground seemed to bubble, and from those bubbles sprouted innumerable weapons — swords, hammers, axes, spears — one after another.

“But I have decided that there is only one friend to whom I will lay bare the depths of my heart.”

Saber greeted the sight with a broad grin.

“Hey, are negotiations established, or breaking down?”

“Established, of course... Or so I’d like to say, but there are two problems,” the long-haired Heroic Spirit continued, still smiling gently. “You see, that one best friend of mine is rather hard to please. Whenever I try to make friends or form an alliance with someone, he says, ‘I will test you to see if you are worthy of my friend,’ or something like that and chases them off with unreasonable demands.”

Recalling the distant past, his smile took on a nostalgic tone.

“In your case... I think he’d normally demand a test of strength. You’re not a citizen of Uruk...

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so if you failed, I believe he'd kill you on the spot. From his perspective, you're a thief with an eye on his treasure, after all."

"I see where this is going. Is the punch line that this 'friend' has been summoned for this War as well?"

"I'm glad you're so perceptive. I can't bring myself to give you hope only to disappoint you later. I'd like to test you to see if you are capable of fighting that king. If it seems impossible for you, I'll exterminate this monster alone; you should just hide yourselves somewhere until then."

The myriad weapons rising from the ground turned to point their tips at Saber.

Even so, Saber grinned — once he had made certain that none of their points were aimed at Ayaka and the silver wolf, who were lying a little ways away.

"How kind of you. If you can do it alone, hadn't you better kill me here? You'd be more certain of obtaining the Grail that way."

"Unfortunately, my wish is already granted. All that remains is to fulfill my promise with my friend. It therefore means little to me whether you live or die."

It would be impossible to imagine a gentler smile, and it never faltered, but its owner might as well have said, "If the mood strikes me, I will take your life."

Saber grinned cheerfully back.

"I love it when things are simple. I just need to show you my martial prowess, correct?"

"Hey, what are you two—" Ayaka started to call out, seeing the situation, but Saber casually threw up a hand to stop her without turning around.

"Be at ease, Ayaka. It's only a test of strength preparatory to forming an alliance. I doubt any normal person would want to ally themselves to a weakling."

"...You're saying you aren't normal, then?"

Saber greeted the long-haired Heroic Spirit's words with a wry grin. Then he raised his voice so as to address both Ayaka and the Heroic Spirit before him.

"It does indeed seem that I am not so 'normal' as I thought. Actually, as king, I was always making trouble for both my people and my younger brother. I ended up being called a wicked and unjust king by my foes as well; the polar opposite of my distinguished rival."

Saber's words sounded self-flagellating, but the wild gleam never left his eyes.

"Even when I understood the logic of rule, I could never manage to restrain my wild gut impulses."

As Ayaka heard those words, she became aware of a sense of discomfort in her own body.

My Command Seals are... hot?

A huge volume of magical energy and unmistakable "tremors" were passing through Ayaka's

unique Command Seals, the source of her connection to Saber. It was as if, in exchange for the energy she supplied him, Saber's uncontainable heat was flowing into her.

"...More impressive than I expected. You must be an incredible Heroic Spirit. All those weapons growing out of the ground... and every one of them represents the pinnacle of human craftsmanship. To have all of them pointed at me..." Saber broke off with a little. Then another, and another, and an instant later, he loosed his pent-up fire in a peal of wild laughter.

"Superb! You must be a great hero! There could be no greater honor! We give Our heartfelt thanks to you, to the Holy Grail... and to Avalon, the far-off paradise of the forefather of Our nation's kings, for granting me the opportunity to challenge a legend who walked the earth in the age of the gods!"

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Somewhere dark.

"I still can't figure it out."

Francesca lay snacking on her bed.

"Figure what out?" Came her Servant's voice out of the darkness.

"Oh, why that weird Saber showed up instead of Artie, even though I used that catalyst."

"What catalyst is that?"

"Oh, well, her legendary sword's scabbard is gone... so I used the box it was sealed in. It had the same pattern on it as the scabbard."

"A box?"

Francesca rolled over on her bed and cocked her head quizzically at the unseen Heroic Spirit's question.

"Yeah; a beautifully polished stone box that the Einzberns apparently found in Cornwall. There were traces of magical energy on it, and it had the same pattern as the scabbard, so I figured it must have been Artie's too."

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The great forest.

As if in answer to Saber's sudden excitement, the long-haired Heroic Spirit smiled and began pouring powerful magical energy into the ground and the numerous "Noble Phantasms" stabbing out of it.

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Ayaka gasped.

Wait a minute! The police confiscated his sword... and it's still at the station, so... he's bare-handed! And he's not even wearing his armor!

Saber had removed his armor, which was composed of magical energy. He was still wearing the clothes he had gotten at the nightclub. Ayaka did not know how much good armor would do against the vicious-looking weapons, but she was at least sure that in ordinary clothes he would be skewered in no time.

Ignoring Ayaka's panicked attempts to stop him, the long-haired Heroic Spirit fired all his weapons from the ground in unison.

At the same time, Saber gave the ground a powerful kick and launched himself into the swarm of blades. As he charged, still elated, he uttered a single, joy-filled sentence:

"Now... let's get started."

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The police station.

"Well, Caster? Have you learned anything from the sword I sent you?"

The response the chief of police got from the Heroic Spirit on the other end of the telephone sounded exasperated.

"To hell with it all. This thing's not a Noble Phantasm; it's just a fancy-lookin' sword. I do like the design, though. Can I keep it?"

The chief had sent Dumas the ornamental sword that Saber had left in the police station. The chief had never expected Saber to abandon his weapon and prioritize flight. So much so that, when he had returned to his office and seen the sword still on his desk, he had suspected some sort of trap.

"It's technically evidence. I can't give it away as I please."

"As usual, you're harder than an over-boiled egg!"

"More importantly, he apparently fired lightning-like blasts from that sword, destroying falling rubble from the opera house. The officers who witnessed it have already undergone memory manipulation, but one of them even described it as resembling a 'beam cannon.'"

The chief had surmised that the power of that sword had also been responsible for destroying the ceiling of the opera house in the first place. As far as he had been able to judge, it was no more than an ornate sword. He had thought, however, that Caster's analysis might uncover

something. He had even hoped that, if things went well, he might be able to exchange it for an agreement with Saber. But if it was not a Noble Phantasm, that strategy was probably unrealistic.

"A blond knight with a bit of red in his hair? Odds are that's Coeur de Lion."

"...So you've come to the same conclusion, Caster."

"Yeah. And speaking of Lionheart, guy was a huge King Arthur fan. Grew up hearing legends about Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table for bedtime stories. His court minstrels were always singing about how great Arthur was, too. Guy was a bit of a prodigal son when he was younger, and some even say he roamed all over the place looking for relics of King Arthur."

"I've heard that as well."

The chief considered it just another of the anecdotes with which later generations inevitably embellish the life of any hero and did not put much importance on it. Caster's response, however, was almost grave.

"Minstrel culture grew out of techniques for passing on the oral traditions of the druidic mysteries to posterity... Or so one theory has it. Either way, you'd best not underestimate contemporary song and poetry. If you make someone here something every night as a bedtime story, it's plenty possible for it to alter their soul like a curse, or a blessing."

"...Isn't Richard the Lionheart a hero from an age of relatively weak mystery?"

"I'm sure it was, on the continent. But while he may've been from modern France, it's England he was king of, and England's an island nation. Hard for the mystery to leak out when you're surrounded by water. I wouldn't be too strange if he touched some of it while he was alive and kicking. The 'Clock Tower,' one of the big mage headquarters, is there right now. That ought to give you an idea."

At that point Caster paused, then continued his lecture to the chief in a solemn tone.

"Say, bro, do you know what they called Coeur de Lion back in my day? Though they might still call him that, for all I know."

"There are too many anecdotes about him; I don't know which you mean."

The chief suspected it would be more of the usual pointless banter, but Caster's talk did occasionally contain valuable information. He did not expect much, but he decided to wait for the Servant to speak.

"They called him... 'The Wandering King.'"

"Oh, that's what you meant. True, I have heard that during his ten years on the throne he spent less than a year in his own country, but—"

"That's not it; I'm not talking about how he was always headed off to a battlefield or on his way back from one."

Caster sounded as if he accorded some importance to what he had to say.

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"I don't understand," the chief asked doubtfully. "Where did Richard the Lionheart wander, then?"

"Over the border between history... and myth."

"..."

There was power in those simple words. Enough to make the chief fall silent in spite of himself.

"Means he was the last king with one foot in an age when faeries and runes were still out in the open. Not something you want to take lightly."

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In the forest.

There is an expression, "lightning quick."

It is normally intended metaphorically, but the scene that burned itself into Ayaka's eyes in that instant was so intense that it really did remind her of flashes of lightning.

Innumerable weapons, born from the Earth, launched themselves into the air. Threading his way through all of them, Saber closed in on the long-haired Heroic Spirit and unleashed a sharp right hook.

His opponent quickly dodged back, but Saber stepped in to match him and threw out a slanting left uppercut.

Again the Heroic Spirit dodged, but Saber's fist past through a lock of his waving hair, and several strands fell, neatly severed, to the ground. The force of the blow had turned Saber's fist into a blade sharp enough the slice through hair swaying in the breeze.

Saber kept up his advance, sidestepping the tendrils of earth his opponent threw at him, and occasionally using even the weapons at their tips as stepping stones. All the while unleashing a flurry of blows worthy of a pro boxer.

The long-haired Heroic Spirit was impressive in his own right. He continued to repel the vicious fists closing in on him with perfect timing.

Saber had the slight edge in actual speed, but his opponent appeared to have the better of him in immediate physical strength and deadened Saber's speed to the extent that he knocked his blows aside. The result was an even contest.

Another volley of earthen weapons flew at Saber, causing him to fall back and make a fresh start.

"You're fast. I'm surprised; I didn't think you'd be faster than me. Was that reinforcement

magecraft?”

The long-haired Heroic Spirit shook his head in amusement.

“Well, it isn’t mine,” Saber answered, his eyes still blazing. “More importantly... it looks like I really can’t get through to you with my fists.”

“So the magecraft is your ‘friend’s’ doing... Have you studied boxing as well?”

“A little. I tried combining techniques I saw in a movie earlier today with the fighting I’ve learned, but I knew it wouldn’t be that easy. I can’t go killing someone I’m trying to forge an alliance with, so I thought I’d try knocking you out with a punch, but...”

“Moving like you just did after only a little training and spectating is quite impressive in its own right,” the long-haired Servant laughed, and his presence subtly altered.

Saber noticed that his opponent’s manner, or perhaps his overall balance, had imperceptibly changed.

“I’m going to come at you a little more seriously, as a member of the Lancer class,” the Heroic spirit addressed him.

“Saber. Pleased to meet you.”

Once they had announced their classes, both grinned broadly and sprang into action.

Again, the sight of the exchange seared itself into Ayaka’s eyes like dancing sparks.

She recalled what Saber had said when the black-robed woman had leapt around the opera house fast enough to leave afterimages in her wake:

“I’ve never seen anyone lighter-footed than Loxley before!”

Ayaka did not know much about lightness of foot, but when it came to pure, instantaneous speed, she suspected he outpaced the woman in black.

Saber, meanwhile, had doubts of his own as he threw out flurries of punches.

What conjuring trick is this? This Heroic Spirit’s even faster than he was before...!

He had no way of knowing, but when Lancer’s aura had changed a moment earlier, he had used his Transfiguration skill to lower his endurance and magical power by one rank each and boost his agility.

They were now equals in speed, but, as Lancer had not lowered his strength, his deft strikes were gradually pushing back Saber’s rapid blows.

The next instant, Saber’s right hand threw a water droplet infused with magical energy instead of a punch, releasing a flash of light and creating distance between him and his opponent. He used that distance, however, not to launch another attack on Lancer, but to retreat further himself.

Fate/Strange Fake 3

Scanning the ground, he bent down — evading tendrils of earth and flying weapons all the while — and with one hand lifted a thick tree branch lying beside him. Then, pointing it at Lancer, he grinned.

“It looks like my thrown-together boxing really won’t be enough. From now on I’ll use a sword, as befits my class.”

“Is that branch in place of a sword, then?”

Lancer sounded deeply interested.

“I always wanted to give it a try,” Saber shrugged. “You know, playing at being the Knight of the Lake, saying, ‘A knight does not die with empty hands,’ and beating off my enemies with a tree branch I picked up.”

Ayaka had been standing beside the silver wolf and holding her breath as she watched the two Heroic Spirits fight. When she saw Saber confidently brandish his tree branch, however, she became more than a little uneasy.

I don't really get it, but he couldn't have deliberately picked a fight bare-handed just because he wanted to try "playing at" whatever it is... could he?

A bead of cold sweat rolled down Ayaka’s cheek. As if at its signal, another massive volley of weapons launched from the earth, their points trained on Saber, who was brandishing his branch. The blades were so densely packed that it did not seem possible he could evade them all, even at the speed he had just been moving.

To Ayaka, the situation looked desperate.

The next instant, however, the scream that had been about to escape her throat was intercepted by an even greater shock:

What should have been an ordinary branch had begun to give off a dazzling light.

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The police station.

“Oh yeah, according to the documents you guys put together, King Arthur’s Excalibur blows everything away with a big slice of light... In modern terms, I’d guess that’s a ‘beam cannon.’”

“Yes. That’s precisely why I assumed that the Heroic Spirit was King Arthur, and that sword was Excalibur, but...”

The chief brooded on Dumas’ comment.

It was said that Excalibur was no human Noble Phantasm forged by smiths and mages in the

age of mystery, but a Divine Construct created by the will of the planet itself. If that was true, could that really be the extent of its power?

At that point, Dumas' amused voice sounded over the phone.

"Man! You might be surprisingly close, bro."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, old Coeur de Lion took his Arthur-mania too far. Didn't even matter if he was on the battlefield or going about his daily business... Apparently he named every sword he ever owned 'Excalibur.' By the end it wasn't just swords; everything he could hold in his hand and fight with was 'Excalibur.'"

"Even the knife he used for cutting up his food, or a rolled -up parchment... or a stick he found lying on the ground."

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In the forest.

"Ex... calibur!"

That must have been the third time Ayaka had seen that light. The brilliant slash that had collapsed the opera house ceiling and cut through the falling rubble in front of the police officers.

This time the streak of light was smaller than it had been then, but the compressed heat it wiped out the myriad weapons hurtling toward Saber in an instant.

He kicked off the ground with the same speed as before, and a moment later he was inside Lancer's guard. He swung the branch, still coated in vestiges of light, to cut down the startled Lancer.

That blow, however, was intercepted by the supposedly bare-handed Lancer.

"Man... Those look like they'd come in handy for cracking walnuts."

Saber sounded impressed. He was looking at the right hand Lancer had used to block the tree branch. Lancer had turned his fingers into sharp blades and skillfully stopped Saber's slash by half-burying them in the branch through its thick coating of magical energy.

"This much power with a tree branch... I'm shocked."

"And? Do I pass the test?" Saber asked without lessening the power he was putting into the branch. "From what I can see, you're not using even half of your real strength."

Saber did not know who Lancer was, but those few minutes had been enough to convince

him that Lancer was exceptional even among Heroic Spirits, himself included.

"You are strong. I don't know what my friend will say, but I think we'll manage if you run while I hold him off if it comes to that."

"...Is this 'friend' even stronger than you?"

"He might be. In the old days we fought for three days and three nights without settling it."

They both gradually relaxed as they conversed. Finally, Saber lowered his branch. No sooner had the magical energy coiled about it dissipated than the wood crumbled to dust.

"Oh, I knew it," Saber sighed. "Once is the limit with wood."

Then he started walking toward Ayaka.

"Hey... Are you okay?"

Realizing that the "test of strength" must be over, a flustered Ayaka rushed over to make sure Saber was not injured.

"Don't scare me like that! What were you thinking...? That wasn't a 'test of strength'; that was a death match!"

"Oh... Well, some tests of strength do require you to risk your life. I knew a knight who headed off to Scotland, saying he was going to test his strength in the Land of Shadows, but on the way he was surrounded by eight thousand bandits and killed."

"Don't try to worm your way out of this with made up stories!"

"You could tell? Of course... No knight was killed by bandits, and the people were never tormented by a band of eight thousand of them... I'm so glad...!"

Seeing Saber struggling to force the conversation onto another track, Lancer addressed Ayaka with an refreshing smile.

"Forgive him. He just can't bring himself to tell you the risks he's been running for your sake."

"What...?"

Lancer's words made Ayaka freeze.

"Has anyone ever told you you can't read a mood?"

"The gods told me that all the time. Like when I slew their bull; I got an awful talking-to that time."

"You slew a bull? Oh, I'd love to hear more about that!"

Saber was still attempting to force the conversation onto another topic. Ayaka grabbed the braid at the nape of his neck and pulled with all her weight.

"Ow! Hey, Ayaka, stop that! It hurts! I get it; I'm sorry!"

When Saber turned around, teary-eyed, he found Ayaka angry, but with her eyes full of tears as well.

“Why... would you do something like that?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“I know. I don’t know the specifics, but I know that you’ve been trying to do something for me... But I didn’t ask for that!”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m going to help you, whether you like it or not,” Saber shrugged.

“If you needed energy, you could’ve just used magecraft or whatever to trick me and turn me into a doll for giving it to you!” Ayaka shouted back. “But you looked out for me... and saved me... You trusted me with your true name... Oh, this is all wrong. I’m grateful to you. I really am.”

Saber was on the verge of saying that he had done nothing she need be grateful for, but he decided to hold his tongue and let Ayaka speak.

“But... I’m not worth it! I’m not worth protecting or trusting!”

In the back of Ayaka’s mind as she shouted was a little girl in a red hood. Every time she remembered the bleeding girl, a voice rang out inside her. A voice shouting at her how vile and cowardly she was.

“Even though you’ve been so nice to me, I’m sure I’ll betray you! I’ll probably abandon you or sell you out for my own convenience!”

Yes, that’s right. I betrayed her.

I abandoned her.

Back there, in the Semina Apartments, I...

Remembering the past made Ayaka’s head ache and her heart race.

Saber gave a little sigh.

“You might sell me to my enemies...? You really do worry about such little things, Ayaka.”

“‘Little’...?”

“Miniscule. It happens all the time. Even my younger brother, my own blood, once sold me to Rome. And he didn’t just abandon me; he actually paid my enemies not to let me go.”

Saber talked of his relatives not as if he was trying to console or sympathize with Ayaka, but as if the story really meant nothing to him.

“Your own brother did...?”

Ayaka was shocked to hear something so depressing.

“Well, it was rough, but when I got back home I found that my brother had gone as far as declaring me dead to usurp the throne, but he totally failed. The nobility and the people all turned their backs on him. I actually ended up feeling sorry for the poor guy. I mean, my reckless spending was the start of all the trouble...”

“B, but that has nothing to do with me, and—”

Fate/Strange Fake 3

Ayaka started to speak, sure that Saber was trying to change the subject again, but he swiftly cut her off.

"It has everything to do with you! The way I've lived, it's no surprise when anyone betrays me, or sells me out, or runs off on me. I doubt I have to worry about this, but you haven't mistaken me for a good person, have you?"

"I don't care about that. I mean, whatever you've done—"

"War."

Saber spoke the word with a little pride, but also with an indefinable sorrow.

"You see, that was the only thing I could do."

Unusually for Saber, he seemed hesitant to say more. Ayaka was unable to speak. She was on the verge of sinking deeper into self-loathing, when a short whimper came from her feet.

The silver beast rubbed its cheek against Ayaka's shins. It almost seemed to be trying to soothe her.

At that point, Lancer, who had been silent until then, placed a hand on the silver beast's back and said:

"Come now; it won't do for the people I'm forging an alliance with to look so down. Would you like something to eat? I can prepare nuts and fruits, if you like."

"Yes, thank you. I'll have some."

Lancer placed a wild fruit in Saber's outstretched hand, then turned to the trees a short distance away, and asked again.

"Would you like some as well? You've been watching us for some time; you must be hungry."

"...Huh?"

"What?"

Ayaka and Saber turned, wide-eyed, just in time to see a lone figure emerge from the trees. It was the black-clad Heroic Spirit who had been present when Ayaka and Saber first met.

"Ah!"

"I'm surprised. Not even I noticed her," Saber said, steeling every nerve in his body to fight at any moment.

The probable Assassin stared uncomfortably at them through the gap in the cloth that covered her face. Then, without warning, she spoke.

"Are you Richard? The Lionheart?"

"I am indeed."

"Hey..."

Ayaka rushed to stop him, but Saber shook his head.

"Now that she's heard this much, hiding it will be more trouble than it's worth."

Saber's indifference prompted Ayaka to let out a larger-than-usual sigh.

Still facing the pair, Assassin continued.

"I heard... what you said."

As she spoke, the girl Assassin clenched her fists so hard that they bled. The gesture seemed to speak of the effort the words cost her.

"Will you... slay the monster?"

"If it harms humans," Saber answered seriously. "When I was alive, one of their kind not only interrupted a battle between me and my distinguished rival, but also slew a number of my followers..."

Saber paused. He sounded both nostalgic and regretful for the past. He seemed to resolve himself before continuing.

"Although that time, my rival — with whom I had planned to have an interview on the battlefield — and I... along with your chief, the 'Old Man of the Mountain,' somehow managed to destroy the creature together."

"...I have heard the story. How... terrifying you must have been at that time."

Assassin seemed ready to pounce at any moment. Saber remained on his guard as well. The situation seemed critical.

Lancer, however, failed to read the mood.

"This, by the way, is the second problem I mentioned when you proposed an alliance."

"...I'd forgotten about that."

"As a matter of fact, there are some 'monsters' I'd like to remove from this city myself. In order to keep my appointment with my friend, you see."

"...I have a feeling the 'monsters' you're talking about might be more dangerous than any bloodsucker."

"Oh no. At the moment, they're just a black 'curse'... and a lump of reddish-brown 'mud.'"

Lancer's usual smile dropped from his face, to be replaced with a look of anguish, as he told of the presences he had sensed in the past day.

"But if they fused and seeped into the Grail..."

"Not just the Grail, but this whole world might be in a bit of trouble."

Chapter 9

“A Horse Not Yet Pale; Mud Yet Firm”

Chapter 9: Day 1, Evening

A Horse Not Yet Pale; Mud Yet Firm

Hundreds of thousands of people are reported missing in the United States every year.

If you were to ask whether that number of people actually disappear each year, the answer would be that half do, and half do not.

Japanese news media often reports the sensational figure. Actually, however, the greater part of persons reported missing are found within the day, or within a few days. Those who remain missing for more than a year — that is to say, those who have truly disappeared — make up less than ten percent of the total. Tens of thousands of people each year.

Tens of thousands is not a number that can be overlooked. Even excepting that, however, the numbers for the years leading up to the Holy Grail War were abnormal.

It was a slow change, in a sense. No one realized its true meaning.

No one except the man who caused it.

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There was a mass of twisted magical energy called “mud.”

Francesca extracted it from the Greater Grail in Fuyuki at the same time she stole a portion of the Grail’s “substance.”

Faldeus, who had inherited memories of the third War, recognized its nature.

Before that, the Grail had been absolutely clear, unpolluted by that clump of sentient magical energy.

Faldeus, following his memories, had immediately realized its identity. He had immediately proposed the “mud” be quarantined.

No orders, however, had come down for its isolation, disposal, or purification. His superiors and their collaborators had an interest in the muck — in the “human evil” that had polluted the Holy Grail and its power and which still retained the power to defile a new grail seventy years later. That is to say, in the infinitely pure, infinitely stagnant wish that had composed a certain Avenger in the third Holy Grail War.

It was the boss of the Scladio Family, Galvarosso Scladio, who had expressed the greatest interest in the “mud,” which Francesca had preserved for years in the gaps between the entrails of adaptable humans.

“Bazdilot could Master that toxic bog,” he had said.

Faldeus had, naturally, been opposed. Because Francesca, who actually possessed the stuff, had accepted the proposal, however, the situation began to grow increasingly tangled.

All of the muck’s hosts had been seized by madness. It had ultimately consumed their bodies as well. Bazdilot, however, remained just as he had been before accepting it into his body. In fact, he was apparently nurturing the mud on his own magical energy, increasing its volume. The Scladio Family praised this as proof of Bazdilot’s power as a mage, claiming that he had subjected himself to his own magical domination in order to control the mud while preserving his sanity. Faldeus knew better.

It was true that Bazdilot was employing his own magecraft in order to control and cultivate the muck. He must also be maintaining an extraordinary effort to prevent it from dominating his mind. Nevertheless, Faldeus was aware that there was a single mistake in the Scladio Family’s accolades.

Bazdilot was not controlling the mud while preserving his sanity; the man called Bazdilot had been mad long before becoming its host — possibly from the very beginning.

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Snowfield industrial district. Underground.

“...You’re back.”

Bazdilot was in the vast mystic workshop with its entrance beneath the meat processing plant. Sensing a presence, he turned. His Servant, Alkeides, stood behind him.

“What did you think of the rumored King of Heroes?” He asked, facing the Archer cum Avenger.

“...Strong. He showed no sign of rising to my bait. He sometimes flew into a rage, but it was never more than a superficial display.”

“According to Francesca, he’s a conceited king prone to violent outbursts... I suppose her information is dangerous to swallow.”

They had no way of knowing that the existence of the Heroic Spirit Enkidu had put the King of Heroes in an unprecedented good humor. He was now far more tolerant than he would normally have been when summoned. But then, to Bazdilot and Alkeides, Gilgamesh’s personality hardly mattered.

After a brief pause, Alkeides addressed his Master.

“O Master, what is the source of your magical energy? Even simply maintaining that ‘sacrificial mud’ would be beyond any common mage.”

“Are you worried that my magical energy will run dry?”

“You must know the number and nature of my Noble Phantasms.”

“...”

In a battle between Servants, how freely each was able to employ their Noble Phantasms was often a deciding factor.

A mystic pass now linked Alkeides to his Master, but he was still unable to fathom the limit of Bazdilot’s resources. To be precise, he could roughly sense the overall capacity of his Master’s Magic Circuits, but the volume of magical energy flowing through the pass between them clearly exceeded it.

“It’s simple; I’m merely using ‘batteries.’”

Bazdilot reached a hand into his pocket as he spoke. It emerged holding an object the size of a baseball.

At first glance, Alkeides did not realize what it was. Once he did, however, he gave a low grunt of admiration.

The thing in Bazdilot’s hand was a crystal wrapped in an air of mystery. Though transparent, it refracted light in complex patterns. It resembled the mystic crystals used by jewel mages, but it seemed several orders of magnitude more pure.

Alkeides had seen such distinctive crystals before. It had the same aura as the “Mana Crystals” that the witches of Greece had once refined from the Mana in the very air. If that was the case, it would mean that Bazdilot had been extracting vast quantities of magical energy from this crystal.

A Mana Crystal stored was like a battery of magical energy, but it was not for boosting or immediately replenishing a mage or Servant’s Od. They were primarily used in order to add external magical energy when casting a spell.

Bazdilot, however, was using a trick; by using the “mud” to pollute the energy, he was able to take it into himself and then channel it into his Servant. Using such a method, the corruption of that warped magical energy — which might justly be called suffering itself — would ordinarily have spread to his brain and driven him mad. Bazdilot was casting his “domination” magecraft on himself in order to manipulate it while keeping his right mind.

Alkeides had no aptitude for magecraft, but he had gained a suitable knowledge of it through his voyages on the Argo and other adventures. He quickly grasped Bazdilot’s process. There were still two points, however, that he could not explain.

Was not the production of Mana Crystals impossible with the techniques of modern mages?

Fate/Strange Fake 3

And would not a crystal the size of the one his Master now held be exhausted relatively quickly?

As if in answer to his Servant's doubts, Bazdilot rose from his seat.

"...There is no need for you to worry about energy."

The pair proceeded a long a corridor of the underground workshop and arrived at a vast open space. It was far larger than the room Alkeides had been summoned in; almost as large as if the plant above had sunk beneath the earth intact.

There, Alkeides saw it.

Strange machines linked to rows of cylindrical water tanks. The center of the space was occupied by a device reminiscent of a summoning circle composed of modern mechanical technology. In a further corner of the room a small mountain sparkled brightly enough to be mistaken for a castle treasury. Lumps of transparent crystal were heaped up like a mountain of jewels.

"That's only a fraction of them."

Bazdilot's underlings began some kind of operation. The human-shaped lumps in the tanks turned to foam and vanished. In exchange, a Mana Crystal the size of a baseball materialized atop the central apparatus.

"...Sacrifices."

Alkeides understood everything.

"A man called Atrum Galliasta developed the system," Bazdilot explained matter-of-factly. "The Scladio Family stole it and improved it. Atrum was a genius at developing these things, but his skill as a mage was lacking. I hear he died without a fight in the Fuyuki War before he had a chance to improve its efficiency."

"I see. So you derive the magical energy you channel into me by sacrificing human lives."

"The Scladio Family has no shortage of enemies. If you find human sacrifice unforgivable, you could always wring my neck right here."

Bazdilot's eyes were reminiscent less of the grim reaper than of death itself. Alkeides quickly shook his head.

"It is a mere trifle compared with my vengeance on the Olympian tyrants. Not even if the life offered as sacrifice was my own."

Then, his whole frame oozing with reddish-brown energy, he voiced his grudge against the gods.

"They did not even sacrifice the souls of my children... They cast their lives into the furnace for common envy."

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The police station.

“Y’know, bro, that Archer who went after the hotel’s got me more worried than Saber.”

“...As always, you have sharp ears.”

“‘Avenger,’ was it? Looks like Little Miss Francesca was carrying around a bit of something awful dangerous.”

“Be that as it may, I hear that the actual Servant was quickly eliminated from the Third Fuyuki War. I suppose no amount of human hate and anger is a match for eminent Heroic Spirits.”

The chief and his men did not fight with deluded conviction and hate alone. He would not, however, deny that there was power in rage, hate, and other negative emotions. If they were totally ineffective, he would need to give another thought to their future movements.

“Ha!” Dumas answered, laughing. “You’re not giving revenge enough credit, chief. Hate, taken to an extreme, is a form of curse all on its own. You might even call it a kind of Mystery that’s still around in the modern day and doesn’t need magecraft. Of course, it’s not really any kind of Mystery; it’s just a human emotion.”

“A curse, huh?”

“Yeah. The dangerous thing about it is that the more just the revenge, and the farther you take it, the better it feels. If hate’s a curse, catharsis is opium. One taste and you’re hooked. Doesn’t matter if you’re an avenger, or an onlooker reading about one in a book or watching one on stage, or an author turning a profit making other people’s revenge into books. Ha ha!”

The chief considered Dumas’ words for a moment, then scowled and asked:

“...It seems impossible, but was there a model for your Count of Monte Cristo?”

“Who can say? One of the models was probably my old man. But did Edmond Dantes exist? Did he really take a revenge that thrilled everyone who saw it? Did he give it up in the end? Was the treasure ever real? Only God knows. It’s one of those ‘Rashomon’ things. Well, it’s definitely true that I made a mint on the novel! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

“...If, for the sake of argument, there was a real man you based him on, and that man met you now, you’d have no right to complain if he shot you dead.”

“I guess so,” Dumas assented to the chief’s sarcasm, laughing all the while.

“As long as I’m a Servant, I might bump into him someday, but I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. I’ll tell him, ‘Thanks to you, I made a boatload more than the villains who tricked you!’ Ha ha!”

“If I was in his place, I’d still be waiting for a chance to sock you one. What was that line?”

Oh yes, it was—”

“Hey, stop that!” Dumas shouted hurriedly. “Don’t quote an author his own work! I won’t be able to help thinking up a better line, and then I’ll want to revise it! And I can’t anymore!”

Some time later, once he had calmed down, Dumas resumed his lecture on the curse of vengeance.

“Anyway, bro, be careful. From a stranger’s point of view, proper revenge — not unjustified resentment — is a pleasure to watch. The curse is contagious, you get me? The harder the revenge is to get, the stronger it is.

“Even that shiny king you’re after could get swallowed up by the vengeance of some country bumpkin.”

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Crystal Hill Hotel. Top floor.

“Humph. He seems to be in high spirits; the forest is taking on an entirely different aspect from what it was by day.”

Windows were shattered throughout the suite. Tine was blocking the strong winds that blew at its high elevation with a mystic ward. She had also erected a number of additional wards tailored to deceive the eyes of any outside observers.

Despite the recent attack, Gilgamesh had declared that “no king would ever allow an arrow or two to dislodge him from his height,” so they had returned to the hotel. Tine’s followers were in the process of mesmerizing construction workers, etcetera.

And the hero himself, ignoring the hardships around him, surveyed the great forest abutting the city. It seemed to improve his mood.

“It appears my friend has found a good opponent for limbering up as well! I am looking forward to it!”

The King of Heroes was looking down at the city, arms crossed. Anticipation of the coming battles must have excited him, because he addressed the following uncharacteristic remarks to Tine:

“Tine, ready an ample supply of magical energy. I will not draw Ea against mongrel riffraff, but even I cannot imagine how much power what I am about to do will take.”

The King of Heroes spoke with eyes full of youthful vigor. Tine was momentarily taken aback, but quickly steeled herself and nodded forcefully.

"Please wield your power as you see fit. Even should my body and soul wither and—" Tine began to say, but Gilgamesh cut her off with a stern tone.

"No more foolish talk. You are free to offer your life to me, your king, but an immature soul such as yours would give me no comfort."

"..."

"Besides, if you wither and die too quickly, how will I fully enjoy myself with my friend? Or do you intend to force on me the labor of seeking out a new retainer with magical energy to rival your own?"

"I-I didn't mean...!" Tine hurried to deny the accusation. The King of Heroes gave her a wry smile.

"If you wish to offer me your life, your soul may be worthy of it by the time this war is finished — the time I keep my appointment with my friend. Do that, and I shall bring a memory of you back to the Throne with me — a memory that, in this war, there was one who merited the title of loyal retainer. Consider it an honor equal to becoming a citizen of Uruk."

"I-I'll do my best! Ah..."

Realizing that she had unconsciously raised her voice, Tine hurriedly moderated her tone.

"My humble apologies. As I am now, that horsewoman refused to even acknowledge me as an enemy..."

Gilgamesh appeared confused by Tine's self-flagellating tone.

"If the equestrian's scorn concerns you, that is hubris," the King of Heroes announced with a fearless grin. He must have guessed Tine's discomfiture. "Whatever your resolve, before the strong, a child is but a child. Naturally, you are but a child in my eyes as well."

"But I—"

"They would face a proud warrior with courtesy, regardless of their apparent age. But while you may have resolve, Tine, you cannot yet call yourself proud. Anyone can steel themselves in the face of certain death. Those who lack self-respect, however, will lack it even in their dotage."

"..."

Tine was not certain she could ever possess such pride. Disregarding her anxiety, the King of Heroes drew a high-class bottle from the suite's wine cellar and brazenly continued as he drew the cork.

"In that sense, you are fortunate; you are my retainer, albeit temporarily. In but a few days you will be able to boast that you were privileged to serve the greatest and only king and to burn my glory into your memory. But then, being king, I would not know the feelings of a proud warrior."

Tine's feelings on her king's proclamation of single-minded egoism had gone beyond exas-

peration. She did not fully understand him, but she was impressed that he seemed to genuinely believe that the world belonged to him. She remained unaware that her senses were gradually numbing.

Suddenly recalling a question that had been worrying her, she decided to risk asking the King of Heroes.

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, may I ask by what means you triumphed in the fourth Fuyuki Holy Grail War, as a small part of your glory?”

The King of Heroes grinned broadly and leisurely sipped his wine.

“Oh-ho. You realize, Tine, that only I could answer that question? Under this ‘Fuyuki’ system, one does not retain memories of the times one has been summoned elsewhere.”

“Even if they are in the past...?”

There was no concept of past or future in the Throne. Taking in all of a Heroic Spirit’s memories would create contradictions, such as knowing the outcome of a Grail War they were currently participating in. Their memories were therefore supposedly adjusted to match the time and place to which they were summoned.

“It may be a desperate measure on the part of the Throne to curb the world’s contradictions, even if only slightly, but it is a wasted effort in the face of my eyes, which see through all futures. Analogizing the past based on a future of a different phase is a simple matter.”

The King of Heroes stared confidently into empty space and endeavored to observe himself on a different phase, but...

“Hm? ...’Splash’...? This can’t be right... Fishing...? No...”

He appeared briefly troubled, then mystified.

“How odd. As soon as I turn my gaze to the phases around when I was summoned to this ‘Fuyuki,’ the ‘mud’ I saw today clouds my eyes.”

He seemed, however, not to particularly mind. After a sip of wine, he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, no matter. If this ‘Grail’ is genuine, I shall use the magical energy it contains to wash the ‘mud’ away. In exchange, I shall tell you the tale of how I built the walls of Uruk in full!”

Tine subsequently learned a veritable mountain of facts she wished she had never heard about a city called Uruk... but that is another story.

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Evening. Snowfield Central Hospital.

In central Snowfield, there is a gigantic white building. At first glance it could be taken for an art museum, but it was the city's largest and best-equipped hospital, a fortress of hope on whose doors numerous patients knocked seeking treatments ranging from surgery to psychosomatic medicine... Or it should have been. At present, the reception desk was in chaos in the face of the waves of patients that kept pouring in, escorted by their families.

"I'm telling you, there's something wrong with my husband! One moment he's heading off to Las Vegas for work, the next he's back and going on about how he's 'never leaving this city again'! It's not normal!"

"It's crazy! One of our guys went out to Indian Springs on a delivery, but he came right back without even doing the job. Then we sent another guy, and he did the same thing!"

The only commonality between all the cases was that every person who tried to leave the city suddenly returned. Their families brought them in, fearing some kind of mental illness. Faced with the massive influx of similar patients, the hospital suspected that something unprecedented was taking place. They were currently holding an emergency meeting to devise countermeasures.

"Oh, Doctor. Is anything wrong?" A young female nurse called out to an aged physician who had already finished his shift. They were walking in an inner ward of the hospital, slightly removed from the chaos.

"No; I just forgot something in a patient's room."

"Oh, I see. I hear the front entrance is a mess right now, so take care."

"I will, thank you."

The old doctor waited until he was certain the woman was gone. The next instant, his form had changed into that of the nurse who had just been speaking to.

"How's it going, Jack?"

The nurse's — that is, the disguised Berserker's — brain picked up a telepathic communication from his Master, Flat.

"No problems here. I have obtained a pass card to proceed deeper inside, so you can rest easy."

Berserker had changed into the nurse completely, including the bar code-style card hanging around her neck. He continued further into the hospital, morphing into the people he passed in the halls and gathering information as he went.

"Is this the right direction?" He asked, back in the form of the original old doctor. "Can you actually see what I see?"

Fate/Strange Fake 3

"Yes, sort of. Let me see... The 'fog' is thickest up those stairs."

"Understood. I will proceed with caution," Jack nodded emphatically.

"Be careful when you transform repeatedly, okay?" Flat added, sounding as if he had just remembered something. "If you end up looking like you're going to catch a cold, like you did earlier, I don't think you'll be able to avoid standing out."

"I-indeed... I merely attempted to transform into an ordinary girl; I cannot imagine why I ended up dressed like that, with my thighs and belly showing..."

Before infiltrating the hospital, Jack had practiced morphing into various forms in their motel room in order to find the least suspicious appearance possible. When he had tried changing into a ten year old girl, however, he had somehow ended up wearing a revealing, black outfit that resembled a bathing suit. As a result, Flat had run around in a panic shouting that if anyone saw them they would immediately call the police and his life would be over and covered Jack with a blanket. He had eventually calmed down, but the cause remained unknown.

"Well, I did get to see you lose your cool for once, so I consider it a success."

"Please don't do it again. I mean it."

Berserker heaved a telepathic sigh, then braced himself and turned to look up the stairs.

I still can't see anything. Still, if my Master says it's there, I suppose it must be.

Berserker was infiltrating the hospital in order to locate the source of the "fog" that blanketed the city.

At the motel, Flat had claimed that he could see something like a mist of mana covering the whole city. Even when he transformed into a mage, however, Berserker had not been able to sense anything out of the ordinary. It seemed that Flat, however, could see those alien current.

"This isn't ordinary Mana," he had declared with uncharacteristic seriousness. "How can I describe it...? It's like if every drop of drizzle was an independent living thing... Or like if the town was covered in a swarm of super tiny locusts..."

"At the level it's at right now, instruments for measuring magical energy won't register anything. If the 'fog' gets about two degrees thicker, though, I think mages with sharp senses will start to notice it. Even right now, a very perceptive Heroic Spirit or something that perceives things differently from humans — like a hematophaga — could probably sense it."

Flat had then dispatched a familiar and observed the city by sharing its senses. As a result, he had learned that the mist around Snowfield Central Hospital was slightly thicker than anywhere else.

Jack had suggested sneaking inside in spirit form. While immaterial, however, he would be completely defenseless against magical attacks and risked sustaining lethal damage if he encountered any sort of trap. They had therefore decided that Jack would use his own idiosyncrasy to transform into someone affiliated with the hospital and infiltrate it while materialized.

"When push comes to shove, don't hesitate to run. When the situation's critical... when it's really critical, I'll use a Command Seal to pull you out!"

Flat sounded determined.

"...Master," Berserker asked, "you just thought that you want me to escape on my own if possible because you don't want to lose such a 'cool'-looking Command Seal, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. Sorry!"

"Honesty is a virtue, but there are times when a white lie would be preferable."

As the exasperated Berserker continued to advance cautiously, his eyes lighted on the words "Special Isolation Ward." It appeared to be a facility for quarantining patients with unusual infectious diseases. Entering or leaving it required passing through a decontamination room.

...What can it mean? Perhaps one of the doctors here is a Master, and they are using this place to keep their Servant isolated?

Jack's musings were interrupted by the sound of someone emerging from the decontamination room. He quickly changed into the form of the nurse he had seen leaving this ward.

A moment later, a woman doctor stepped out into the corridor.

"Oh, didn't you go home already?"

"I'm sorry; I forgot something and..."

"I see. I wonder if they're still swamped over in psychosomatic medicine. It's just been one thing after another — the pipeline explosion in the desert, the terror attack on the police station, the tornado this afternoon, etcetera — and I'm sure a lot of people must be in shock..."

The doctor, who was apparently trying to consider the situation rationally, gave a self-deprecating shake of her head before continuing.

"My little sister works at that police station, so I was out of my mind until I heard from her this morning... Still, it's not all bad. Little Tsubaki's very stable today. If her condition stays like this, she might even regain consciousness one of these days."

"Really? That's great!"

Berserker did his best to follow the conversation. He could not instantly copy memories.

"Yes. I thought it was somebody's idea of a joke when we first found that weird tattoo on her hand... but now I wonder if the legendary 'protectors of the land' might've given her a good luck charm."

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“Really...?”

“Oh, sorry. Here am I, a doctor, going on about silly things like that...”

The doctor laughed to cover the awkward moment, then walked off. Once Berserker had seen her descend the stairs, he stepped into the decontamination room. And then...

“...Could you hear that, Master?”

Even over telepathy, Berserker’s voice was female to match his appearance.

“Yes,” Flat answered, “and right now, I can see it.”

“It’s settled, then... I’m almost positive that this Master called ‘Tsubaki’ and her Servant are through here.”

“Yes... but I think you’d better head back for now. If this was a video game, it would definitely be asking you if you want to save right about now.”

“I concur. My apologies, but I have no desire to proceed further without making preparations.”

Flat’s senses weren’t alone this time. Transforming into an ordinary person had significantly lowered Berserker’s abilities as a Heroic Spirit, but he could feel it too. A dense, ominous aura was swirling around the door that lead from the decontamination room to the sickroom.

“If the stuff that spread into the hallways through the decontamination room is a black fog of magical energy... then what I can see in the entrance to that room is part of a giant waterfall.”

Berserker could not see that clearly. But, although his true identity was unknown, he had manifested as a “killer,” and all his killer instincts were raising an alarm. They were warning him that the sickroom was filled with the same air that must have surrounded him in the fogs of London. They were warning him that ahead was Death itself.

“I can probably manage if I use my Noble Phantasm... but I can’t say for certain. Using bombs to destroy the entire hospital might be a better—”

“W-we can’t do that! We don’t even know if that Master’s a friend, an enemy or a friend!”

If he can say that in a Holy Grail War, he really must be lacking something a mage needs... Or perhaps I should say that he has something a mage needs to lack.

Well, it’s probably just that attitude that brought him together with that wonderful “professor” of his.

Berserker sighed and turned on his heel.

“Understood.”

He made a point to remember the letters on the nameplate beside the entrance: “TSUBAKI KURUOKA.”

“If I did that, I wouldn’t be a ‘killer’ anymore. I’d be... something else.”

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Inside Kuruoka Tsubaki's sickroom.

"It looks like... someone — no, something — was just outside," Jester Karture, still in the form of a young boy, muttered, as if to the girl lying before him.

"Still, when I followed the disease that's eating into people to its source, I never expected its Master to be a dying girl," the boy muttered to himself as he stared at the Command Seals on Kuruoka Tsubaki's hand. He must have somehow snuck into her sickroom after concealing his vampiric face and powers.

"Yes, it's still too soon. Just a little longer... Until the curse of the Servant possessing this girl is ripe..."

Jester continued his ominous mutterings with an ecstatic grin.

"Ah, I wonder what my dear Miss Assassin will do when she finds out about this child. Once she learns that this girl might kill innocent townspeople just by being alive... Ha ha.

"If I use this girl right... I just might get to see Miss Assassin cry!"

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Snowfield Central Church.

Oh man, what a screw-up. I can't believe we let that fiend escape.

Hansa Cervantes, the overseer of the Holy Grail War, was in a room he had rented in the central church's residential wing. He stretched out a hand to a wine glass brimming with jalapeños and jolokias and, after giving his thanks to the Lord, began to snack on them.

His subordinates, the "Quartet," were currently in pursuit of the vampire. Hansa himself was making preparations to sortie as soon as they found the creature and, in the meantime, waiting for Masters to call in search of an explanation from the overseer. The first was now coming to its end, however, and there had been no reports and no Masters.

The latter, of course, came as no surprise. This had been advertised as a Holy Grail War without the Holy Church; it was doubtful if any of the Masters would ever call on him.

I'm still expecting the losers to seek asylum, but either nobody's been eliminated yet, or they got killed Master and all...

What should I say to make fun of that police chief if he shows up wanting protection for his whole crew?

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Hansa shrugged. On the TV, a documentary on “the continued rise in missing persons cases across the United States” started playing.

“...Over the past several years, there has been a steady increase in the number of people who are reported missing and remain missing for more than a year. If you look at this graph, you can see that this year continues the gradual upward...”

Faced with the missing persons figures displayed matter-of-factly on the TV screen, Hansa frowned slightly.

Another increase. How many of those people fell victim to vampires and other monstrosities...?

There was no expression on Hansa’s face as he reached out, took another hot pepper, and bit down hard on it with molars that had been fitted with a variety of consecrated tools.

He had no idea that vampires had nothing to do with the recent increase in missing persons. Neither did people running away from home or fleeing to other countries.

He did not know that a mage, full of pure malice, was behind it all.

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The industrial district. Underground workshop.

There was a mountain of Mana Crystals piled up in a corner of the room. Alkeides could sense the high-density magical energy packed into every single one.

“...With that amount,” he emotionlessly declared, “I could fight for half a day at full power without difficulty.”

“That’s half a day?”

“Are you dissatisfied? It is true that it might take longer than that to settle things with that golden king...”

“No. That will suffice.”

As he spoke, Bazdilot unrolled a map on his desk and showed it to Alkeides. After he lifted several layers of concealment, several glowing red points appeared on what had been an ordinary map of the industrial district.

“If that’s enough to sustain you for half a day...”

The red lights indicated industrial fuel oil tanks, water tanks, and huge gas tanks shaped like giant cylinders crowned with hemispheres.

“If I put together everything I’ve prepared for this War, you should be able to fight continuously at full strength for several months.”

When he heard those words, Alkeides understood. The various tanks indicated on the map were all fakes, designed to keep up appearances. Inside, they were vaults full of Mana Crystals identical to those in this workshop.

“...To produce such a quantity... How many have you sacrificed to this contraption?”

The question was meant sarcastically; he realized that there must have been too many victims to count. Bazdilot, however, answered without batting an eyelash.

“Oh, just twenty-four thousand nine hundred and seventy-six people.”

“...”

“Is that enough to shock you? It’s only about half the number the South American drug cartels have killed in the past few years.”

“No; I was merely surprised that you keep the exact figure in your brain.”

“Do I seem so irresponsible with human lives to you?”

Were Bazdilot’s words genuine, or was he making a black joke? Not even Alkeides could gauge his Master’s true intent by his eyes. The man was like a killing machine.

“Sacrificing that many people in total secrecy is no mean feat.”

“It was nothing. It’s not as though I was able to abduct several dozen people from in and outside the country a day on my own. It was the connections of my master, Galvarosso Scladio, that made everything possible.”

Bazdilot let out a short breath, then continued dispassionately.

“The more massive the Scladio Family grows, the more enemies it has. If they’re going to eliminate their enemies anyway, those lives should serve a practical purpose.”

Bazdilot then narrowed his eyes and spit out what could be taken for self-criticism.

“Although, I was only able to extract dregs from today’s thirty-six... That’s because I killed them first.”

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The Coalsman Special Corrections Center. In Faldeus’ workshop.

In his room, surrounded by puppets, Faldeus was thinking.

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Bazdilot is dangerous.

No, that's not quite accurate. The real danger is the Scladio Family.

If Bazdilot wins this War, Scladio will be unstoppable. Once the combination of the 'mud' and crystals spreads to the Scladio Family's other mages, they'll become even more powerful than they already are. If that happens, they'll be a check on the Clock Tower and the Holy Church... but government control will no longer be possible.

Having gone over his various concerns, Faldeus made a decision.

I will arrange for Bazdilot to disappear during this Grail War. But that alone won't be enough.

"There is no one else here," he murmured. "I would like to speak directly. Will you agree to that, Assassin?"

Every light in the room went out. All about him, darkness ruled.

It had a different quality from ordinary darkness. Faldeus felt a pressure as if the shadows around him were living, crawling things. A shiver ran down his spine.

Before he had a chance to activate a night vision spell, a voice called out from behind him.

"...Speak that which troubles thee."

Assassin's way of speaking was indirect. Faldeus broke out in a cold sweat and clenched his fists.

"It would mean leaving this city, but... there is a person I want you to deal with in a way that looks like an accident or natural causes. A man who is always protected by several mages, and who we cannot assassinate by the ordinary means at our disposal. His name is—"

As Faldeus was about to speak the target's name, the pressure of the darkness increased.

"Set foot on this path, and thou may not turn back."

"..."

"Have thou faith worthy of ending a human life?" The Servant asked his Master for a final confirmation.

"Know that should thy faith ever prove false, the curse will rebound upon thee and devour thee whole. If thou are prepared... speak the name of thy calamity."

Faldeus felt that not only the mystical parts of him — his Magic Circuits, his Crest, his Command Seals — but even his heart and blood vessels had frozen solid. Even so, he said the name.

"Galvarosso Scladio."

"..."

"The first man you will kill is not a mage or a Heroic Spirit; he is an ordinary human. If he lacked his mystical protection, I could easily kill him myself."

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The same time. The Clock Tower.

In an office at the Clock Tower, Lord El-Melloi II was worried. Ordinarily, he would have been planning to set out for Snowfield immediately and at the very least bring his wayward pupil back with him. An unexpected interruption had, however, stopped him in his tracks.

Adashino of the Department of Justice Administration had personally handed him a “written request.” It read: “Bearing in mind the circumstances attendant on the loss of Kayneth El-Melloi Archibald, an important member of the Clock Tower staff, Lords are forbidden from travel to Snowfield, which had been designated a special danger zone.” Whatever Adashino called it, it was clearly an order.

Lord El-Melloi II had been forced to a sudden halt in the middle of preparing Mystic Codes for his expedition. He had half expected it, and could muster no great anger.

“Still, Justice Administration’s response was too fast.”

The Department of Justice Administration had made use of all of its connections to ensure that El-Melloi II would be unable to travel to the scene of the Grail War. They were presumably concerned that he might choose to ignore their “request.”

He had already confirmed several lookouts outside, and he lacked the skill to force his way past them.

As a worst case scenario, I should consider the possibility that the masterminds in Snowfield have ties to Justice Administration at the Clock Tower...

No, if that was the case, Justice Administration would have tried to pressure me into going there in advance. They would have wanted me to analyze the Grail War.

A knock on the door interrupted his mental soliloquizing. He opened it, and Rohngall the puppeteer entered, accompanied by the same disciple as the day before.

“Excuse us. Are you in better health today, Your Lordship?”

“Yes. I’m sorry you had to see that. But it appears you’ve come in a hurry. Do you have more new information?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact... Actually, it was my pupil here who discovered it... It’s already begun to be rumored among the Clock Tower’s younger residents, and will probably be more widely known tomorrow, but I thought I had better tell Your Lordship first.”

El-Melloi II looked quizzical. The boy disciple timidly handed him a notebook computer. When he opened it, the screen displayed a page of what could justifiably be called the world’s

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most popular video sharing site. (It had been acquired several years previously by the operators of a major search engine.)

“Umm, I tried privately searching local news sites and things like that, in case they had any more information about what happened yesterday. Then I found this rock band called ‘Snow Smoke’ that plays in Snowfield. They uploaded that video.”

Could someone have recorded that arrest from a different angle...?

El-Melloi II frowned at the screen. A moment later, a small grunt of surprise escaped his throat.

On the screen was an image of the same Heroic Spirit who was supposed to have been arrested, skillfully strumming a guitar in a jam session with the band members.

“A-a Heroic Spirit... transmitted a video...?”

“Well, it was the band that uploaded it, so he didn’t distribute it himself..”

“More importantly, what is this Heroic Spirit doing? What possible plan could lead him to act like this...?”

El-Melloi II attempted to analyze the Heroic Spirit’s actions after his own fashion, all the while thinking that the man played guitar oddly well. His musings, however, were cut short by Rohngall’s apprentice pointing at the screen.

“Ah! There! Look, in the corner of the screen!”

“Hm...?”

El-Melloi II looked and saw a girl with distinctive glasses and bleached blonde hair. His frown deepened as a single word escaped his lips.

“...Sajō?”

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In the forest.

“Hey,” Ayaka called out to Saber as they moved through the woods.

“Hm? What is it?”

“...Sorry. For earlier.”

“Did you do anything to apologize for?”

Saber seemed genuinely mystified. Ayaka dropped her gaze.

“...Yelling at you, pulling your hair... forcing my selfishness on you.”

“You really do worry about trifles, Ayaka. If it will clear your conscience, however, I will ac-

cept your apology. I will also apologize to you. For using you as a pretext to propose an alliance without considering your feelings.”

Ayaka, faced with the genuinely contrite king, looked away as she answered.

“That’s really nothing to be sorry about.”

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The Clock Tower.

“Oh, so it is true.”

El-Melloi II turned to look at Rohngall. The scarecrow-like puppeteer nodded awkwardly.

“As I was saying yesterday, Your Lordship, one of the Association’s people on the scene claimed to have seen one of your disciples...”

Once again, El-Melloi II sensed an inconsistency in the conversation.

“The pupil they claimed to have seen,” he asked Rohngall, “wasn’t Flat, then?”

“No, we heard about Flat Escardos later. But genius or not, surely Your Lordship would not dispatch a peaky lad like him as an advance party? It was Sajō there we were talking about...”

“Wait... I need a moment.”

Sajō Ayaka. El-Melloi II did indeed know a mage by that name. Several years ago — shortly before the fifth Holy Grail War in Fuyuki — she had been a student, not yet fully an adult, and had attended his classes for about a month.

If El-Melloi II had been an ordinary lecturer, they would both probably have forgotten each other’s faces after such a brief acquaintance. Due to El-Melloi II’s methodical personality, the fact that she had come to him for advice concerning witchcraft, her unwilling involvement in the time Flat had deciphered the Voynich manuscript and caused trouble on a grand scale, and the circumstances surrounding her elder sister, however, they had kept in contact. Still...

“I’m sorry, there’s something I want to think on. Would you mind calling again later? Thank you very much for the information.”

El-Melloi II expressed his thanks to Rohngall and his disciple, who gave each other quizzical looks. Once they had left the room, he took out his cell phone. Then, with a practiced manner, he quickly typed out and sent an e-mail.

It read: “When you see this, I want you to call me immediately. I have an urgent question for you.”

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The recipient's name was "Ayaka Sajō."

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Somewhere in Snowfield.

"Hm? What's that strange sound?"

Saber instinctively looked around at the abrupt sound of Ayaka's phone alerting her that she had mail. The pair of them were on their way to their "next objective."

"My cell phone. It looks like someone just messaged me."

Ayaka flipped open her phone and frowned as she read the message.

"Oh-ho, so that's a modern letter. If it is a love letter, I shall avert my eyes; read all you want."

"It's nothing like that."

The message displayed on her cell phone screen was just signed "Filia" in Japanese.

Filia. The real name of the "white woman" who had dragged her into this Holy Grail War.

When Ayaka read the body of the message, expecting another unreasonable demand, all she could do was tilt her head in bewilderment. Filia's manner toward her had not changed since their meeting at the "castle," but this e-mail was different. It read like it had been written by a different person.

"Oh, you must've had a rough time too! You're free now, so do whatever you feel like."

"A bit late for that... What does she even mean?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Oh, there's something I forgot to tell you."

Ayaka shut her phone, deciding to think about it later.

"I, umm... I won't tell you to mind your own business anymore. I mean, I'm sure you'll do whatever you want anyway, whatever I say.

"But," she continued, sounding as though she were forcing herself to speak in order to convince herself as well as Saber, "I'd like you to at least warn me before you do anything dangerous. I know I can't stop you, but I do want you to at least pause for a moment.

"...It'd be a pain if you died and I didn't get a chance to say thank you."

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The Clock Tower.

“Thank you very much. I’ll be in touch again when I know more.”

El-Melloi II hung up the phone. The wrinkles on his brows were deeper than usual.

“...What’s going on?” He muttered to himself.

He took another look at the log of the call that had come in response to his e-mail. It was an international call from Romania. With Sajō Ayaka’s phone number.

El-Melloi had already heard from Flat that she had gone to Romania on business.

“The person I spoke to on the phone just now was unmistakably Sajō Ayaka herself, and she was unmistakably in Romania.”

Rubbing his temples and remembering the girl he had seen earlier in the video — the girl who, with the exception of her blonde hair, was Ayaka’s exact duplicate — El-Melloi II let out a groan.

“But if that’s the case... who on earth is that woman in Snowfield?”

Prologue IV

“The Star Performer’s Feast (Part 2)”

Prologue IX

The Star Performers' Feast (Part 2)

In the dark.

Time rewinds to just after Saber was arrested and made his speech in front of the television cameras.

"Man, that was hilarious!"

The memory of a Heroic Spirit being lead off by the police made Francesca burst into fit after fit of laughter until she collapsed in the center of her bed, wiping tears from her eyes. Eventually she raised herself to a kneeling position, then crossed her legs and raised one hand.

"Well, it's about time for me to do my part as a mastermind!"

She snapped her fingers, and the candles around her lit. Faint, flickering light illuminated the center of the room.

It revealed a magic circle, identical to those the other Master's had used to summon their Heroic Spirits, on the floor before the luxurious bed. Only one detail separated it from the proper ritual: the fact that the canopied bed sat where the altar should have been.

Then, toying with a cookie she had produced from who knew where, Francesca began a rhythmical, singsong chant.

"♪A pinch of silver and a pinch of iron♪

"♪Boil up the head clerk♪

"♪That's Até's lovely recipe♪"

It was far removed from the incantation for summoning a Heroic Spirit. It sounded as if Francesca was mocking the Grail War itself. If anyone had heard her, they would have either burst into a rage, or scoffed that she could never summon anything that way.

"♪Fill, fill, fill, fill, fill it up♪

"♪Fill, fill, fill it till it spills♪

"♪Bring together five closed wounds♪"

The ridiculous chant tumbling rhythmically from her lips ironically resembled the one a cer-

Fate/Strange Fake 3

tain homicidal maniac had once used, in a “real” Holy Grail War, to summon her “best friend.”

There were still openings in the roster of Heroic Spirits; she was not trying to force the Grail to manifest an extra. It was true that such an incantation should have had no chance of succeeding... but Francesca had not even finished it before the magic circle began to glow.

“♪I offer you my body, I offer you my—♪

“Ha ha! Ahaha! ♪Time’s up, so I’ll skip the rest...♪”

She had not put a powerful desire into her call like the silver wolf, nor had she bridged the gap with genius mystical interference like Flat Escardos. And yet, her summoning had succeeded.

There was only one reason: the affinity of the Heroic Spirit to the “catalyst” she had used to call it was extremely high. And that catalyst, enshrined atop its altar — the bed — was Francesca herself.

The light of the summoning circle faded, and there stood a boy. He looked about the same age as Francesca. His lustrous hair was neatly cut. His face would have been beautiful, except for something indefinably sickly about his eyes.

An instant later, the dim space where the summoning circle had been became a field of flowers as far as the eye could see. In its center, the boy Heroic Spirit made a reverent, weirdly exaggerated bow without looking at Francesca’s face. Then he flung his arms wide and shouted:

“Ha ha! My new Master must be quite the eccentric to summon me! Very well! I don’t know what you expect of me, but I won’t make you regret it! I’ll lift—”

“Lift you up to heaven with a dream of bliss, then drop you all the way down to hell with bewitching, scorching nightmare!’ Am I right?” The grinning Francesca called out from her seat at the center of the bed.

“Hm? Oh? What’s this?” The Heroic Spirit muttered inquisitively, looking confused. Francesca’s words to him were exactly what he had been about to say to her.

“And once you’ve said that, you turn all these flowers into human children’s arms!”

“Hm? Hmm... Have you, maybe, summoned me before? If so, I’m shocked you’re still alive. To summon me twice, your brains must be—” The boy started to say. Then he realized who the girl mage in front of him really was.

“What? No way. Really?”

“Really. When do your memories from ‘when you were alive’ stop?”

“They go up to the first time I was executed... But more importantly, what are you up to?”

“A Holy Grail War. Of course, I’ve already messed with its guts so much even I can’t tell if it’s real or fake!”

As he listened to Francesca’s explanation, a look of delight gradually stole across the face of the Heroic Spirit in the form of a boy. At last, he burst into wild peals of laughter. As he cackled, the whole field of flowers turned into children’s arms growing from the ground. Pairs of adjacent hands clapped their palms together as if to celebrate the boy and girl by surrounding them with a round of twisted applause.

“A-a-are you crazy!?” The boy Heroic Spirit shouted, still laughing and clutching his belly. “You must be! Hehe... Hahahaha! Wh-wh-why would you ever do something like that!? You must be out of your mind! Hahahaha!”

The boy cavorted, cackling as if he had gone mad. He spun, leapt onto Francesca’s bed, sat down beside her, and opened one of the bags of snacks that lay strewn about. Then he familiarly rubbed his shoulder against Francesca’s and began to munch on the bag’s contents.

“Ahaha! Me summoning me! What an awful joke! Mmm... Hey, these are delicious. Is this what modern snacks are like? What an incredible age!”

“Isn’t it? Anyway, I was the catalyst. I was ninety percent sure I’d get ‘me,’ although I did hope that maybe, just maybe, Gilles would turn up!”

“Oh, come on; Gilles would never show up for a Grail War!”

“As a matter of fact, he did! Gilles! I could only watch from a distance thanks to the descendants of that bug-tamer from Kiev, but he really was there! He was in the throne, you know? Gilles!”

“That’s amazing! What was his class? Saber? Rider?”

“Nope. Caster.”

“How!? I mean Gilles, a Caster? Oh, because of me! Hahaha!”



When the pair had finished entertaining each other with a conversation only they could understand, Francesca's face grew suddenly serious.

"So you see," she addressed the Heroic Spirit sitting beside her, "I'm pretty serious... I decided to rush the schedule and hold a Holy Grail War I can have my way with in this city! And I got all sorts of people and countries mixed up in it!"

"Why didn't you summon Gilles, then? Although I guess it'd be hard to survive a Grail War with him."

Francesca answered the obvious question with a little shake of her head.

"Well, we can take our time talking about that later. Before that, we've got to seal our initial contract!"

"Oh, you're right! It completely slipped my mind! Speaking of which, if you do get the Grail, what will you use it for? Of course, I can pretty much guess."

"I'm pretty sure you guessed right."

"I see. It's true that you'd need something on the level of a Grail to capture that labyrinth."

The boy sprang up from the bed, moved to the center of the summoning circle, then turned to face Francesca and made a respectful bow.

"I ask you: are you the arrogant, foolish princess who wants to enslave me in your quest for the Holy Grail — or for endless pleasures and nightmares?"

"Yup! Absolutely!"

A chorus of agonized cries sounded from beneath the ground, and the children's arms growing around them burst into flames. In the blink of an eye, they were bleached skeletons. Then they crumbled to ash. The ash swirled in the gloom, and the Heroic Spirit loudly declared the contract formed.

"Behold! The pledge is made!"

The boy spread his arms amid the dust and sang out his name at the top of his voice:

"My name is Francois Prelati!"

Then, with an innocent smile, he continued the formula of the contract.

"As the loyal servant of my Master, Francois — whoops, you're in a girl's body now — Francesca Prelati, I swear to risk my life to guide you to the Holy Grail!"

"I also swear — to risk my soul to win through the Holy Grail War fair and square, so that you may obtain the Holy Grail in righteous glory!"

Then, the boy and girl's smiles turned sly. Francois and Francesca continued to in perfect

unison.

“Just kidding!”

×

×

The same time. Snowfield. Underneath a thermal power station.

Around the same time that Francesca was summoning herself somewhere in the city, Haruri, a mage specializing in witchcraft who had been trying to summon the true Berserker, was dying underneath one of its several thermal power stations.

How did things end up like this, again...?

Seeing the color of blood in the corners of her glazed eyes, she concluded that she was going to die soon. Healing magecraft was one of her specialties, but her magical energy was almost exhausted.

She was certain her preparations to summon Berserker had been perfect. She was also certain that her summoning had actually succeeded. The problem was that the Berserker she had summoned had gone on a rampage before she had a chance make her contract. She had taken the full force of one of its blows.

Still, I guess I'm... satisfied. It seems stronger... than I expected...

She could dimly see the Heroic Spirit she had summoned. It looked bizarre.

It appeared to be pacing around the room on all fours. Each step it took produced harsh, mechanical sounds. Incandescent light blazed in its eyes. The groans that occasionally emanated from it sounded distorted, like record played with a rusty needle.

I poured plenty of my magical energy into you... and you should be able to get an alternative power source from this station... So, you'll be able to rampage to your heart's content...

Haruri could not suppress a wry smile as she watched the rust-covered “thing” approach her.

Although I bet you hate using energy your rival, Nicola Tesla, made. Oh... maybe that's why... you went out of control...

“It” was now right in front of her. The ghastly Heroic Spirit looked like nothing so much as a robot with the motif of a four-legged spider or a grotesque lion.

But it's strange... Even as Berserker... I expected him to look more... human. Could Mazda's influence have something to do with it...?

I knew I should have summoned him as Caster and not let Francesca have it...

It was too late for regrets. Haruri, however, did not fear death. She specialized in witchcraft,

but she always used her own blood for her sacrificial medium.

She had even drawn her summoning circle in her own blood. She had needed to shed a very nearly dangerous amount of it, but she had taken her time, occasionally giving herself a transfusion from the blood packs she had prepared in advance for the purpose and using healing magecraft to stimulate blood formation.

If the thing she had summoned as a result was going to kill her, then this must be as far as she could go. Haruri smiled derisively at herself and slowly stretched out a hand toward the Heroic Spirit.

“Alright... I’ll sacrifice myself... to you...”

She had only one wish for the Grail: revenge against the “magical society” that had taken everything from her people. She did not care if it was the Clock Tower, the Atlas Institute, or even the various unauthorized mage circles that dotted the globe. She simply felt that nothing could be more ironic than bringing them to ruin through machinery, industry, or any other overpowering “energy” distant from magecraft.

Maybe it serves me right... for trying to use the Grail for something so petty...

“Come on, kill me. In exchange... go on living however you want as long as you exist. Show the whole world what you are. Make their secrecy pointless...”

Haruri put the last of her willpower into the declaration. Once she had made it, it did not matter to her when she was killed. She resolved to wait for the Heroic Spirit to strike. What actually descended on her, however, was an unfamiliar woman’s voice.

“You’ve got a weird way of struggling.”

Haruri instinctively opened her eyes, which had been shut tight. Before her stood a breathtakingly beautiful woman with unnaturally white skin.

An... an Einzbern homunculus!?

She had heard that one was in the city and assumed it was after a Master’s position. Still, had never expected it to appear here. She had been sure the site of her summoning was completely secret.

I really must be paying for my sins... I’ve always been careful to only use myself as a sacrifice, but once I got here, I didn’t care what happened to the townspeople... and it made my magecraft impure.

She decided that if she was going to be killed either way, it did not make much difference if it was by the Einzbern homunculus or the Heroic Spirit. Then she noticed something strange.

“...What?”

Her wounds were closing. Her vision was clearing.

Fate/Strange Fake 3

“Wh-what? But I...”

She did not remember casting a healing spell. In the first place, her magical energy was running dry, so she could not have even if she wanted to. Haruri was baffled, and what the “white woman” said next only baffled her more.

She turned to the Berserker beside her and addressed it as if it was her pet dog.

“Come on. That girl’s your Master. Now hurry up and make a contract.”

What in the world...?

Pain receded and confusion took its place in Haruri’s brain. She had not yet formed a contract, but the rights of a Master were still hers. She barely had time to think that no Berserker would listen to a mage who did not even have Command Seals, however, before another of her accepted notions crumbled.

“Pro... PRRRRRRR-ro-ro-ro... Protec... ect-ect-ectTTTT.”

Berserker did as the “white woman” said and bowed its head in a show of obedience to the fallen Haruri.

“Good boy. That’s it. I’ll tie your meridians to her for you.”

An instant later, the pass of magical energy linked them, and the Heroic Spirit’s sensations reached Haruri through her Command Seals. That was when she realized — the Berserker she had summoned was afraid of the “white woman.”

“Wh-who... are you...?”

“Still,” the “white woman” continued, ignoring Haruri’s question, “you’re lucky a ‘vessel’ this easy to enter just happened to be here.”

She stared at her own hands and feet, then nodded, apparently impressed. Next, she turned to look at the confused-looking Haruri and slowly reached out a hand to touch Haruri’s cheek.

That was when Haruri realized. Realized that the “power” flowing into her through the woman’s hand did not belong in this world.

Im-impossible... This is... But she’s not even a Heroic Spirit...! No; even for a Heroic Spirit, such concentrated “power” is...!

The “white woman” — or, more accurately, the thing inside the “white woman” — must have sensed Haruri’s fear.

“Don’t worry,” she smiled confidently. “I may not look like it, but I’m fond of humans.”

There was warmth in the words, but they seemed to come from such a height that none of it reached Haruri.

“Now that I’m here, I’ll be sure to rule you properly!”

At that point the mechanical doll that was supposed to be Haruri’s Servant let out a roar, as if to show his approval. As if in praise of the “white woman.”

“RRRRrrrrRRR—!”

What?

Haruri had been released from the fear of death, but another fear had taken its place.

She did not yet know how terrible the thing that had taken up residence in the Einzbern homunculus due to the influence of the catalyst she had prepared truly was.

Thus, the players were all assembled. On the stage of Snowfield, every one of them was a spectator, every one of them was a critic, and each and every one of them was a performer.

With the exception of one boy who had yet to make the jump from the interlude to the stage. One boy the Grail had yet to assign a part.

Interlude

“The Trials Begin”

Interlude

The Trials Begin

Sigma did not remember the moment he had become a child soldier. It was how he had lived as far back as he could remember. He had been forced to fire a gun when he was barely five years old. Enduring the further mental and physical pain caused by strange magical experiments for purposes he did not understand.

The would-be mages had created a unit to carry out magical warfare against enemy nations. He was apparently one of the soldiers created for that purpose.

He heard that they had gathered other soldiers with similarly elementary attainments in magecraft — soldiers who, either through random chance or through distant relation to mages, possessed Magic Circuits — and forced them to have sexual intercourse with female soldiers who likewise possessed Magic Circuits, even if only a few. Of the resulting children, they had selected twenty-four whose Magic Circuits were of a usable level and assigned them Greek letters as code names.

A small, nameless special forces unit whose existence was unknown even to the people of the nation it served. It had been created with the idea of employing unusual abilities to inflict damage on enemy nations, with no regard for secrecy. Mages, primarily the Clock Tower, had gotten wind of it in advance and crushed it along with the teetering dictatorship.

Sigma had only learned of his precise roots after he had been released from the former government. It hardly mattered to him whether they were true or false.

A mother had given birth in the natural course of events, without acquiring a knowledge of magecraft. The child had been taken from her before she had a chance to name it and set on the path of a tool of the state.

On the basis of his experience as a child soldier, he had become a mercenary who used magecraft. That, however, had only been a matter of doing what his employer told him to. It was not worth mentioning.

“I really don’t think there’s anything else to tell.”

“You make it sound ordinary, but you realize that’s quite a hard life, objectively speaking?”

Sigma had tried explaining what kind of person he was in order to establish communication with the beings that called themselves “shadows.” When he reexamined himself, however, he was forced to acknowledge that he had spent his life doing only what others had forced on him.

The fact that that realization did not make him feel empty made him think that he really

might be a little odd. Still, there was nothing he could do about that at this point.

“What happened to your mother?” The boy with the snake staff asked.

“I don’t know if it’s the truth, but I’m told she participated in a Grail War in the far East as a mage’s assistant and died. The mage was called Emiya Kiritsugu.”

“The fact that you remember the mage’s name clearly means you must have some feelings on the matter.”

“Does it? I wonder. I don’t know anything about their relationship except that she was his assistant. I don’t even know my mother’s name or what she looked like. I only know Emiya Kiritsugu’s name because he’s considered a legend among mercenaries who use magecraft.”

He had been a freelance mage of remarkable ability, known and feared by the nickname “mage killer.” He had completed dangerous missions one after another all across the globe, until the Einzberns had hired him. Sigma had heard from his employer that the man had won through to the endgame of the fourth Holy Grail War in Fuyuki, although Sigma’s mother had supposedly lost her life in the process.

“Only... If my mother followed that man of her own free will, I’m a little jealous of her.”

“Jealous?”

“Whatever her feelings, my mother must at least have seen a reason to live in that Emiya Kiritsugu man. I, on the other hand, have nothing; no one to respect and no one to want revenge on.”

Sigma spoke matter-of-factly. He sounded less like he was disparaging himself than he did like he was simply stating facts.

“Oh, you can make a reason to live,” the Captain told him. “Get into enough desperate scrapes, and you’ll naturally find something to cling to. Fight your way through certain death, boy. Keep struggling against God. Never accept anything. It’s on the other side of all that that the proof you’re alive will be born.”

Fighting through certain death to find a reason to live was putting the cart before the horse. The Captain could only talk that way because it was not his problem, Sigma thought and decided to ignore the advice. The Captain, however, looked behind Sigma to the entrance of the room with a look of real enjoyment on his features.

“Look, boy; Your first trial’s already arrived.”

Sigma turned and saw a shadow standing there. To be precise, he saw a girl wrapped in shadowy black robes.

“Are you...?”

Just as Sigma was about to take her for another one of the “shadows,” he noticed something out of place. So far, only a single shadow had appeared at a time. Now, however, he was certain

that he had seen the Captain and the girl at the same time.

By the time Sigma realized that, it was already too late. In an instant, the girl Assassin was right in front of him. In a voice stripped of emotion, she asked:

“Are you a mage who seeks the Holy Grail?”

From that moment on, Sigma was to walk into a series of unreasonable “trials.” Not trials that anyone demanded of him — trials simply to learn who he was.

With no way of knowing whether the “self” he obtained at the end of those trials would bring him glory, or despair.

a t e / s t r a n g e h a k

Bridge

“One Day, In The City”

Bridge

One Day, In the City

Snowfield. An urban area.

What am I looking at?

Clutching his prosthetic right hand, the young man — a member of Clan Calatin, the special unit under the direction of the chief of police — gasped at the scene unfolding before his eyes.

He saw a bowman with reddish-brown skin and a strange cloth hanging over his head. The Heroic Spirit was nothing like the Assassin they had fought in the police station. He was equally unlike the monster that had subsequently taken the man's right hand. He was simply, simply... strong.

Even if they gained the full power of all their Noble Phantasms, the young officer had no confidence that any of them would be of use against the bowman.

Oh, I see. This must be a real hero, the officer almost acknowledged. Then he gritted his teeth. *...This guy? The bastard who's wrecking the city and trying to kill a little kid?*

Several of his fellow Clan Calatin members already lay on the ground around him. If might makes right, then he supposed the bowman in front of him must be "right." The officer's last shred of pride, however, would not allow him to accept that. It lit a flame of courage in his heart.

Then he gasped again.

What am I looking at?

He saw a police officer just like him. That officer, however, was not part of Clan Calatin. There was something strange about him.

They're still fighting with that monster. Who the hell are they?

He appeared and vanished, vanished and reappeared around the bowman. Time and again his body was mangled or pierced with arrows, but the same officer continued to challenge the Heroic Spirit. His attacks were doing no damage to the bowman. Nevertheless, they had been fighting ceaselessly for minutes.

When that bizarre scene had gone on for a while, the bowman spoke gravely.

"Weakling... I would ask your name."

Fate/Strange Fake 3

The officer took a step back.

“I have no name,” he replied, grinning broadly.

Then there was two officers. They continued speaking with the same voice.

“O great hero, you who live on in legends of the Age of the Gods, changing your form with the times and accumulating great deeds: I, a humble criminal, so weak that a gust of wind could blow me away, have only one thing to say to you.”

The number of officers increased again.

“I am sure you have a reason for your resolve,” the four officers surrounding the bowman declared. “But if that resolve leads you to deny divine power! If deny and discard all the deeds of the gods, good and ill alike!”

The eight “things” had taken on a number of appearances in addition to police officers. Their voices echoed down the city street.

“However mighty you may be, you are now, as you desired, human.”

Sixteen roars addressed the bowman’s soul.

“O hero who has fallen into thuggery, into humanity! However great a hero you may be! Even if you have the power to destroy the world!”

Thirty-two fearless grins hemmed in the bowman. The next moment they were vanishing, as if they were being absorbed back into the original one.

“So long as your essence is human... you will be hunted by a powerless ‘killer.’”

Then, the police officer — the nameless Berserker, Jack the Ripper — faced the reddish-brown bowman. Laying bare his own essence, he shouted the name of his Noble Phantasm — the trump card he played to end the great hero’s life.

“From Hell!”

In the midst of the disintegrating Grail War, a chain of battle silently began. Almost as if hapless fate was speaking to the mages and Heroic Spirits:

“O weaklings, challenge the strong.”

next episode: [Fake04]

CLASS

Avenger/True Archer

Master: Bazdilot Cordelion


Name: Alkeides


Sex: Man


H&W: 203cm, 141kg

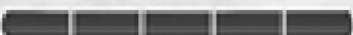
Alignment: Chaotic Evil

STR  **A**

M.E  **A**

END  **B**

LCK  **B**

AGI  **A**

NP  **A++**

Personal Skills

Distortion: A

Proof that Alkeides has been forcibly wrenched out of the Class he was originally summoned in and given the characteristics of another Class. In exchange, the rank of one of his original Class Skills is lowered. In Alkeides case, Independent Action is reduced to rank C.

Eye of the Mind (True): B

Insight on the battlefield founded on training and discipline. As Alkeides has discarded the instincts given to him by the gods, the skill manifests due to the skills he built up as a human.

Valor: E

The skill to brush aside glamour, confusion, and other forms of mental interference. It also boosts combat ability. As a side effect of Command Seals being used to extract the divine curse from Alkeides' body, the skill has weakened considerably in comparison to its original rank.

Battle Continuation: A+

The ability to continue fighting even after suffering mortal wounds, representing Alkeides' mighty struggle for life on the battlefield.

Class Skills

Avenger: A Independent Action: C Anti-Magic: A

Noble Phantasm

The Twelve Glories: King's Order

Rank: C-A++; Classification: —; Range: —

The numerous proofs of overcoming trials that Alkeides obtained in exchange for giving up his immortality along with his divinity. Alkeides is able to materialize Noble Phantasms he obtained in legends of his life, such as the hide of a divine beast and the War God's Belt, and use them as his tools. He is, however, twisting the reason of the Holy Grail in order to make use of them. As a result, doing so consumes several times more magical energy than they ordinarily would.

Shooting the Hundred Heads: Nine Lives

Rank: C-A+; Classification: Unknown; Range: Adapts to fit circumstances

The manifestation of the technique of "shooting the hundred heads" — employing a wide variety of martial arts with handheld weapons or bare hands — as a Noble Phantasm. It draws out the power of a weapon to its utmost limit, taking many forms — from anti-personnel to anti-army and anti-fortress — according to the circumstances.

Rank: EX;

CLASS True Rider


Master: ???

Name: Hippolyte

Sex: Woman

H&W: 159cm, 50kg

Alignment: Lawful Good


STR  **B**

M.E.  **C**

END  **B**

LCK  **D**

AGI  **A**

NP  **A**

Personal Skills

Charisma: B

A skill that combines both the ability to command necessary to unify a nation and individual personal magnetism.

Divinity: B

A skill that indicates the degree of Divine Spirit Affinity, the depth of one's kinship to the gods. Hippolyte was a priestess of Artemis as well as a queen, in addition to being a child of the war god Ares, and so is cloaked in powerful divinity. As she did not reach the Throne of Gods after death, however, she falls short of A rank.

Class Skills

Riding: A Anti-Magic: C

Noble Phantasm

The War God's Belt:
Goddess of War

Rank: A; Classification: Anti-Personnel-Anti-Fortress Noble Phantasm; Range: —

A battle standard — an aspect of Hippolyte's father, the war god Ares — remade in the form of a sash. It greatly raises the user's strength, endurance, agility, and magical power. Due to the rarefaction of Mystery in the modern era, however, it cannot be used to raise these parameters beyond a certain point.

Afterword

(Contains major spoilers for the main story; reading after finishing the book is recommended)

You don't need a blade to bring down a hero; it just takes three Command Seals, a lot of sacrifices and mud, and advanced magecraft to keep from going insane... That's actually a much bigger hassle than getting a blade ready. Anyway, that's pretty much True Archer's true identity!

After a conversation that went something like:

Me: "Still, even if he has become _____, I doubt _____ would ever shoot a little kid like Tine. Even in Fuyuki, when he was _____, he came to his senses when he saw _____."

Nasu: "You shouldn't underestimate revenge, especially revenge on the gods. It's true that aiming his bow at a child is an absolute taboo for him, Ryōgo, but he wouldn't have a hope of getting back at the gods if he wasn't prepared to break that taboo."

I made up my mind to go ahead with it.

By the way, I do have an answer to the problem of how he tailored that "hide" that human works don't penetrate. It has so little to do with the main plot of Fake, however, that I don't know if I'll get a chance to explain it. I'll have to hope Fake does well enough to justify a materials book where I can put that kind of behind-the-scenes detail...

With that out of the way: Narita here! It's been a long time.

The Fate smartphone game recently depicted a new aspect of Gil (Toyotomi Gilyoshi). I'm in the middle of worrying whether or not what I do in Fake should reflect that.

Yes, Fate/Grand Order. FGO.

The FGO scriptwriters told me, "Spoilers kill half the fun, so we're going to keep all the little things secret." As a result, I got to enjoy FGO's fifth chapter, which is set in the United States, completely fresh, but that policy can also lead to tragedy.

The following is condensed from exchanges that took place over a long period of time.

Me, before writing Fake: "What? Is it really okay if I write about the _____ in the fifth _____ in Fake!?"

Nasu A: "Yes... Use it wisely."

Nasu B: "You can also use (material about Dumas' novels)!"

ME: "..."

Nasu C: "Don't hold back. Write as much as you want."

Me, while writing: "Hmm, yes... (This is juicy material... I'm sure no one's used it yet)..."

Nasu, wearing a gas mask: "Now announcing the Chateau d'If event and FGO chapter five!"

Me, in March: "Gwaarrgh (It overlaps with a bunch of plot elements in Fake)! (Dies in agony.)"

Fate/Strange Fake 3

Nasu: “Who would have thought he’d actually die...”

I don’t know how many people will actually know about the elements that this conversation was based on. That aside, Sanda-san, who watched the tragedy unfold from the sidelines, said that he had a “bad feeling” and asked to be shown scripts for events in advance if the characters in them overlapped with his work. Two weeks later, he screamed, “They overlap!” and I was forced to watch him rework the entire second half of the Case Files plot. But that’s another story.

Anyway, you might think that I’m being too sensitive about redundant plot elements, and I probably am, but it’s a fact that the story of FGO is just too interesting. I want to add more excitement to Fake so that it doesn’t lose out.

Speaking of Sanda-san, I’ve also been having him supervise my depiction of magecraft and related subjects.

Sanda: “Gil’s line here, about ‘a desperate measure on the part of the Throne to curb the world’s contradictions,’ is about as unreasonable as saying, ‘A desperate measure on the part of the Earth to prevent humans from flying into space — gravity!’”

Me: “But doesn’t that sound like something he’d say? About the Earth?”

Sanda: “...It does!”

And so, working through sometimes fun, sometimes strict editorial oversight, we managed to put together a collection of rule violations that we could only get away with in a “fake” Holy Grail War that works differently from the one in Fuyuki. I hope that you enjoy it with an open mind as one of the “Holy Grail Wars held in distant, different worlds” that Da Vinci mentions in FGO! Francesca tinkered with the Holy Grail System a lot when she brought it to America, so, while there are things in Fake that would be categorically impossible with the Fuyuki Grail, I would appreciate it if you would bear in mind that this is not the Fuyuki Grail War.

Now, our full cast is finally in place. In book four, I’m going to write about Flat and the “white woman’s” pasts. I’m also finally going to add magical battles between Masters, so I have feeling there will be ingredients for a lot of fighting. I’d like to show as many flowers blooming and scattering as I possibly can, so please look forward to the next book. Try to guess True Berserker and Watcher’s true identities while you wait!

Book four will probably be published this winter, but I suspect that the final date will be determined by a combination of TYPE-MOON’s various machinations and the schedule of Morii-san, who’s drawing the manga version of Fake.

Every aspect of Morii-san’s manga, from the magnificent battle scenes to the lively expressions on the characters’ faces is genuinely great. Please pick it up if you have the chance!

My editor, Anan-san, who I gave a lot of trouble with deadlines; my Dura editor, Wada-san, who adjusted the schedule for Durarara!! — which I was working on at the same time — and

(Contains major spoilers for the main story; reading after finishing the book is recommended)

everyone in the editorial department; all the concerned parties who I am indebted to through their Fate spinoffs, beginning with Sanda Makoto-san, Higashide Yūichirō-san, Sakurai Hikaru-san, Mashin Eiichirō-san, and Sanda Makoto-san; Team Barrel Roll, who did part of the Servant background research for me; Morii Shizuki-san, who has produced wonderful illustrations along with a number of character designs; Takeuchi Takashi-san and Urobuchi Gen-san, who honored me with their comments on the wrappers of books two and three — especially Urobuchi-san, for giving me permission to use “her” “son” — and, most importantly, Nasu Kinoko-san, who created Fate and provided me with editorial oversight; everyone at TYPE-MOON... as well as all the readers who picked up this book and made it this far:

Thank you very much!

April 2016, while believing it a secret that Watcher was originally Shielder.

Narita Ryōgo